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WAKHAN IN HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL SETTING



INSTITUTE OF REGIONAL STUDIES, ISLAMABAD

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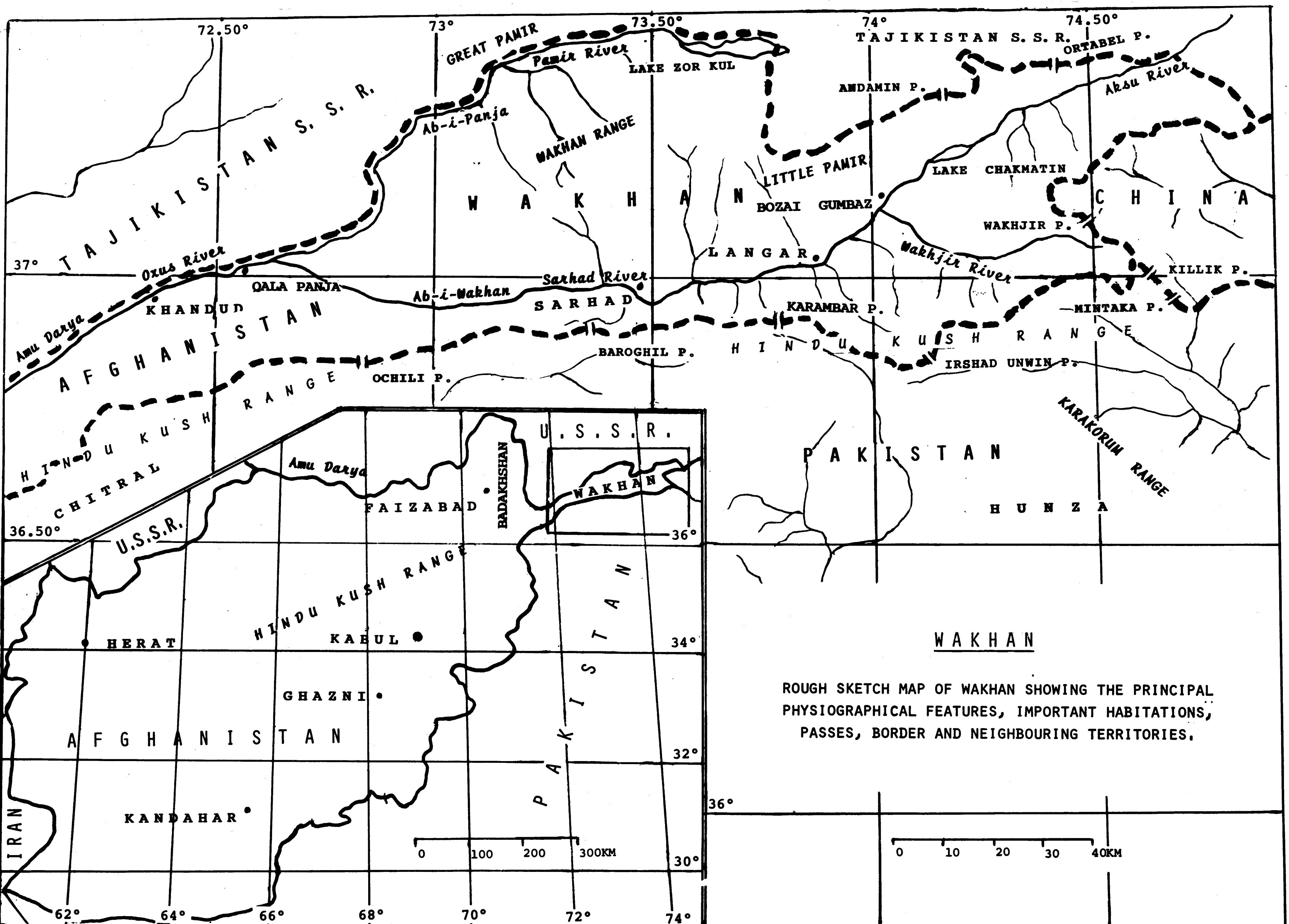
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INSTITUTE OF REGIONAL STUDIES
12, STREET 79, G–6/4, ISLAMABAD



WAKHAN

ROUGH SKETCH MAP OF WAKHAN SHOWING THE PRINCIPAL PHYSIOGRAPHICAL FEATURES, IMPORTANT HABITATIONS, PASSES, BORDER AND NEIGHBOURING TERRITORIES.

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WAKHAN IN HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL SETTING

The April 1978 revolution in Afghanistan and the Soviet military intervention in that country in December 1979, which captured world headlines, are possibly the most significant developments in the region in recent times. These are important not only because of the new permutations they have created in the pattern of American and Russian spheres of influence, but also due to the fact that an area once considered fairly stable and secure has now become a major flashpoint. The international response to these developments, after the first shrill condemnation, however, tended to be confined to the ethical issue of human rights viewed largely in context of an arithmetical equation of the freedom of a people and the violation of that freedom. Thus much of the western press and the leadership judged the situation as essentially a gross transgression of certain inviolate democratic norms rather than for its strategic content.

In this excessive preoccupation with the day to day events — the rate of death and destruction on either side —, the historical significance of the change went unnoticed, and few western analysts really appreciated the subtlety of the new geopolitical circumstances. For nations in South Asia, particularly Pakistan, the Soviet transcursion of the Hindu Kush barricade — a kind of a strategic Rubicon — represented the beginning of a new phase which did not augur well for the region. It was not merely the presence of so many thousand Soviet forces in Afghanistan that was paramount, but the final obfuscation of a credible line of division between the farthest limits of Russian influence and the countries of South Asia.

It is this point that needs to be realised rather than surface issues such as "unrolling" the Afghan revolution or converting that unfortunate country into a quagmire for the Russian forces. The disfigurement of what has long been looked upon as a natural political watershed between the territorial limits of Central Asia and South Asia has undone a geo-strategic fixture that has survived centuries of pressure. Now, for the first time the teeming lands of South Asia have become uneasy neighbours of a mainland power based in the Asian heartland.

It is, therefore, necessary to appreciate the new developments in the light of the potential they have for influencing the future situation in the region. Whatever may be the nature of the presence of the Russian forces in Afghanistan, whether they came like friends to help an ally in dire straits or as an instrument for ensuring the permanency of political change, it is important to note that conditions have been created which could encourage tampering with the existing territorial and security patterns. The Afghans and the Russians have already signed a number of agreements relating to their common border, and although not much has become public about the nature of these agreements, but it is believed that they are weighed in favour of the Soviet Union. Similarly there are reports that there has been considerable restructuring of Afghanistan's territorial system in a manner that makes the Russians responsible for certain vital areas. A case in point is that of Wakhan — the thin Afghan salient cutting across the

Pamirs in the north-east — which, while remaining a part of the country is entirely under the military control of the Soviet Union. It is not clear as to the extent the Russians exercise control over the salient or what is the nature of the Afghan-Soviet agreement regarding its border — although there are allegations that it has been "annexed" and added to Tajikistan S.S.R. in the north —, but the very fact that Russia has taken over the task of securing the corridor suggests a considerable alteration in the existing strategic equation in the region. There is a qualitative difference between Soviet presence in Afghanistan under the umbrella of Afghan sovereignty and in Soviet presence in a part of the country where there is no palpable Afghan authority.

It is the latter situation that is of concern to South Asia as the Soviet influence will then directly abut on the region without the fiction of an Afghan diplomatic cushion between. The Wakhan salient represents an interesting example of such a development. The Soviet Union is in control of the thin strip of land deploying its forces in considerable strength, while it continues to remain a part of Afghanistan. The two countries which share a common border with the salient — People's China and Pakistan —, face an anomalous situation in that the proximity of Soviet military presence is packaged in an illusory Afghan border. Beijing and Islamabad have, however, been explicit in referring to the imminence of Russian presence in the corridor. In the given circumstances, Wakhan is a unique political development, different from the rest of Afghanistan, and as such requires a more thorough study.

THE HEDGE

On a map, the Wakhan salient appears an incongruous cartographic interpolation: A thin strip of Afghan territory extending from its northeast corner and stretching across the Pamirs to meet the border of Xinjiang province of People's Republic of China. Its length is about 300 kilometers and the breadth varies between 13 kilometers at the narrowest to 65 kilometers at the broadest. The salient insulates Pakistan to its south from the Tajikistan S.S.R. of the Soviet Union in the north, and at the same time provides Afghanistan its only direct link with China through a 64-kilometer common border. Historically, Wakhan marks the spot at which culminated the over fifty-year long 'Great Game' played by imperial Britain and Tzarist Russia in the nineteenth century over the vast territories of Central Asia and the northern portion of South Asia. Delineated on the map in 1895, the Wakhan strip was designed to check the forays by Russian cossacks across the Pamirs into the tiny states in the north of British India. British diplomatic and military pressure and the supposed sanctity of an international border gave a veneer of credibility to the salient. Eightyfive years later (1979-80) the Soviet intrusion into Afghanistan and a military presence in Wakhan destroyed the whole scheme of things and the marauding cossacks were replaced by tanks and missiles sited to the north of Pakistan.

In a contemporary context, therefore, Wakhan has acquired a potential for drastically influencing the strategic configurations in Asia. A formidable coalition of historic, geographic and contemporary political compulsions have once again made Wakhan and the adjoining territory the focal point of international competition. Wakhan's importance lies in the fact that it straddles an area which bristles

with interactive and counteractive international developments. It is positioned near the two most vital axes in the region which run in different directions. The existing China-Pakistan link through the Karakorum highway in an northeast-southwest alignment transects an imaginary USSR-India link in a northwest-southeast alignment. Wakhan provides the Soviet Union with a point which is nearest to its ally India, in its occupied portion of Jammu and Kashmir.

Another important factor is the salient's emplacement in an area that abounds in international territorial and political disputes. The Sino-Soviet quarrel over the Pamirs is as old as the corridor itself. To the southeast, beyond Pakistan's territory, is Aksai-Chin, a major bone of contention between China and India. The Durand Line, which marks the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan and begins its westward journey from the tri-junction of the Sino-Afghan-Pak boundaries in the frozen wastes of the Sarikol range, has been rejected by Afghanistan. Kabul has since the last 38 years been making irredentist claims to large tracts of Pakistani area. And finally there is the explosive Indo-Pakistan dispute over the state of Jammu and Kashmir, which has been interwoven in recent times with Indian claims to Pakistan's Northern Areas which is conterminous with the corridor.

Wakhan thus is no more the buffer or hedge it was initially designed as. The presence of Russian forces in the salient and the reported dovetailing of its defence with the security system in Tajikistan S.S.R. have radically altered its purpose to an extent where it impinges on the Chinese and Pakistani security parameters. This Soviet move has also eliminated China as a neighbour of Afghanistan through a common border. Moreover, with the current Indian efforts to forcibly tailor the cease-fire line in the Siachin glacier and Delhi's repeated articulation of its claims to large chunks of Pakistani territory to the south of Wakhan, appear to be preparing the ground for a recrudescence of a political confrontation by all the four Pamir powers — USSR, Afghanistan, China and Pakistan. India as a pretender to political and geographical presence in the Pamirs, has its interests latched to the USSR-Afghan axis.

It is for these reasons that Wakhan has acquired an importance that is much more than what its dimension deserves. The quadriplicity of political forces, each with its own defined aim, circumscribing this small arid area, have the capability of creating a situation which could influence peace in the region. Russia now casts its shadow directly across the northern areas of Pakistan and gains a continental access to South Asia apart from endangering the Sino-Pak axis. To the south of the salient, the Afghan and Indian claims to Pakistani realestate have a surprising contiguity. While such pressures, real or imaginary can be considered to be a part of international politics, but at the same time it is also necessary to appreciate the probable outcome of such pressures. At some point of time an attempt could be made to snuff out Pakistan's presence completely in the strategic angle formed by the conjunction of the Hindu Kush and Karakorum ranges. At first sight this hypothesis may seem to be somewhat over-drawn and least probable but even the worst case scenario must be kept in mind. Who could have ever forecast that one day Afghanistan would no longer be a neighbour of China.

Pakistan has already voiced its strong fears over the reported Russian control of Wakhan(1) fully realising its consequences. China

too has made its disquiet known(2) as have other nations.(3) Although there is not much to go by to suggest a Soviet "annexation" of the salient except the presence of Russian forces, but seen in the light of the historic and contemporary circumstances, the probability of Russians having more than an internal peace-keeping role appears possible.

In all these developments Pakistan has a particularly unhappy position. Although it inherited its borders with Afghanistan from the British after the subcontinent was demographically divided between India and Pakistan in August 1947, it never looked upon the salient as a buffer. It was merely an extension of Afghanistan, but fortuitously acted like a hedge between Russian territory and Pakistan. Wakhan admirably served its purpose and Pakistan was satisfied with this arrangement without having to articulate any pretensions of being a Pamir power. All this has now been nullified, and Pakistan has been pushed into performing a role as a defender of the northern marches in an area that is riven with disputes and claims and counterclaims.

This study endeavours to recapitulate the historical circumstances that led to the creation of the salient and its importance to the British power. It concludes with an analysis of the present situation after the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and the contradictory pressures that are building up in the region.

<u>WAKHAN: LAND, PEOPLE</u>

Location: Between 71.50 degrees and 74.50 degrees east longtitude and 36.35 degrees and 37.50 degrees north latitude. It extends from the east of Badakhshan province of Afghanistan, and is bounded by Tajikistan S.S.R. in the north, People's Republic of China in the east and Pakistan in the south.

Geographic Zone: The Wakhan corridor and Pamir Knot together represent one of the eleven geographic zones of Afghanistan, although some authorities suggest that Wakhan and the Pamir are in reality separate geographic zones.

Physiography: The Wakhan-Pamir zone is essentially a mountainous area, comprising of parts of two Pamirs, one mountain range and two small valleys. It also has two distinct water systems. 'Pamir' is a Kokandi Turki word meaning 'desert' and is used to denote the high-level valleys falling off from central mountain systems. The northern portion of Wakhan comprises the Russian Pamir or the Great Pamir on a southwest-northeast alignment. In the southeast is the Little Pamir or Afghan Pamir which abuts on the Sarikol range. A mountain system known as the Wakhan mountain range or Nicholas range traverses in a roughly east-west direction and acts like a watershed for the Ab-i-Wakhan. The total length of the range is about 100 miles (160 kilometers) and its peaks rise to a height of 19,000 feet (5,700 meters) and are perpetually snow-covered. Thus 82.9 per cent of Wakhan-Pamir zone is above 10,000 feet (3,000 meters) and 17.1 per cent between 6,000 and 10,000 feet (1,800 to 3,000 meters). Snow covers all the Pamirs above 16,500 feet (5,000 meters) above sea level. The Hindu Kush range which originates from the Pamir knot runs to the south of Wakhan, dividing it from Pakistan.

The two river systems are the Ab-i-Panja or the Pamir Darya in the north and the Ab-i-Wakhan or Sarhad Darya in the south. The Ab-i-Panja originates from the western shore of lake Zor Kol or Sir-i-Kol (Lake Victoria) in the Great Pamir on the border with the Soviet Union, and flows in a southwestward direction for about seventy miles (112 kilometers) till it joins with the Ab-i-Wakhan at a point somewhere near Qala Panja. The two rivers then jointly become the Amu Darya or Oxus river. The lake Zor Kol and Ab-i-Panja form an international boundary with the Soviet Union for its entire course till it meets Ab-i-Wakhan and from thence onwards, the Amu Darya becomes the international boundary. The lake Zor Kol, which was named Lake Victoria by the Pamir Boundary Commission, and was also temporarily known as Woods Lake after Lt. Wood of the Royal Navy who "discovered" it, is at an elevation of 13,600 feet (4,080 meters) in the Great Pamir. It is fed by glaciers and is the source of another small river, the Kokmar, which is a tributary for the Aksu river. The lake is about 12 miles (19.2 kilometers) long and between 1¼ to 2½ miles (two to four kilometers) wide, surrounded by snow-capped mountains.

The Ab-i-Wakhan or Sarhad darya which lies to the south, begins from lake Goz Kol or Chakmatin in the Little Pamir, and wending a southwesterly course is joined by its principal tributary, the Wakhjir river near Bozai Gumbaz. The river briefly flows southwards and then follows a westerly course parallel to the north face of the Hindu Kush range till it meets the Ab-i-Panja at Qala Panja. A large number of streams from the two Pamirs and the Wakhan range feed the two rivers. Lake Chakmatin or Goz Kol or Goose lake is at an elevation of 13,020 feet (3,906 meters). It is a long shallow sheet of water about 4½ miles (7.20 kilometers) long by about 1½ mile (2.4 kilometers) wide at its greatest width. The lake is also the source of another river, the Aksu, which starting from the eastern shore of the lake, flows in a northeasterly direction, and crossing Russo-Afghan border, flows northwards and then westwards to join the Amu Darya. The three rivers — Panja, Sarhad and upper Amu act like a drainage system for the southern Pamirs and the northern side of the Hindu Kush, but do not provide irrigation facilities or serve as navigable watercourses.

The high mountains, the Pamirs and the tortuous course of rivers are the main physical features of the salient, but in the western portion, two relatively wide valleys exist. One is at Ishkashim, about two miles (3.2 kilometers) across and three miles (4.8 kilometers) long, and the other at Qala Panja, less than one mile (1.6 kilometer) in all directions.

Climate: The climate in Wakhan is marked by great differences in the seasonal and diurnal temperatures, largely due to the physiological features of the salient. The east-west alignment of the river valleys permits an exposure of both sides of the valleys to direct sunlight during most of the daylight hours, while the north-south oriented numerous valleys and ravines have very little sun. This uneven exposure to solar heat influences the atmosphere. One result is the mountain winds which blow with sudden gusts down the valleys. In the afternoons the whirlwinds fill the air with dust and sand, particularly during summer and autumn, and in winter the wind adds to the severity of the blizzards.

Of the seasons, spring and summer are of short duration. Snow melts during April and May and by early June and July the valley oases are dotted with green fields, the vegetation lasting for four months. During July and August the land and air are dry and warm with a very high solar radiation effect. In the shade and in the evenings it is cool and comfortable. Autumn starts in September, when thick clouds and snowstorms appear in the high mountain peaks and occasional rain falls in the valleys. By November the storms descend into the valleys and the long winter sets in. Thick clouds swirl round the mountains for most of the winter, with light snow accompanied by gusty, westerly winds in the valleys and only occasionally clear, frosty weather. This cold, desolate condition sometimes lasts till the end of May.

In the Pamirs, the climate generally is the same as in Wakhan, again largely influenced by the physical features of the area. Two main seasons are distinguishable — winter and spring-cum-summer. The winters are cold, severe and very long, while the summers are short but the possibility of early morning frost is always present throughout these months. With high solar radiation, the diurnal temperatures alternate between burning and freezing.

Vegetation: The aridity of the climate together with a stony land surface results in poor vegetation in the area. Clumps of dwarf willow, birch and hawthorn are found along the river gorges and upto an attitude of about 13,000 feet (3,900 meters). There are also some juniper trees scattered over a small area of the steep northern slope of the Darra gorge along the Sarhad river. Vegetation in the Pamir plateau is restricted to low growing plants that are adapted to severe conditions. In the dry mountain slopes grow low shrubs of sagebrush, locally called *shewagh* and *tersken.* Apart from supplying good food for sheep and goats, these plants make the only fuel found in this area. The areas that are sufficiently moist, for example those near lakes, ponds, streams or with irrigation are covered with thick tall growth of sedges and cobresia. There are also large, thick peat bogs, particularly in the Little Pamir plateau. When these bogs are not too soggy they provide good pasturage, specially for horses, and when the peat is cut and dried, it becomes one of the main sources of fuel.

Fauna: Wakhan and Pamir are not rich in fauna. The wild animals include mountain goat, the large-eared Tibetan wolf, brown bear, the long tailed marmot and hare. The famed Marco Polo sheep, named after the Venetian traveller who first brought it to the notice of the western world, is perhaps the most widely known animal of Wakhan. It is a hunter's prize, and the Afghan government in recent times encouraged affluent hunters from the west to hunt it for a considerable price. In fact, most of the travellers and explorers who visited the salient specifically mentioned this handsome and somewhat large sheep. The few birds that are found are the Tibetan mountain turkey, snow vulture, eagle, and a few migratory water fowls.

Crops: There is a variety of local wheat and some barley and millet, some horsebeans and a little fodder. The Wakhis (the local inhabitants) do not grow any vegetables, but some non-Wakhi settlers are growing a good crop of potatoes. Along the streams and irrigation channels, poplars and willows are grown.

Domestic Animals: The herds and flocks of the local and pastoral inhabitants are sheep including the Central Asian fat tailed sheep, long haired goats, yaks and bactrian camels. While horses are found in the region, but they are bred only in Wakhan. Donkeys and fowls are found, but are rare.

Communication: Perhaps the main reason why this desolate landscape has found a place in history is that it straddles the ancient thoroughfare which made a movement of ideas and merchandise from east to the west, north to the south and vice versa possible. Wakhan lay from the earliest times on the main route linking western Asia and through it the classical world, with the innermost Central Asia and thus the Far East. Sir Aurel Stein points out that "Nature itself, as it were, intended Wakhan to serve as the most direct thoroughfare from the fertile region of Badakhshan to the line of oases along the southern rim of the Tarim Basin ..." The valley provided easy travel, except for difficult ground in two places. Moreover, the valley was almost a kind of a junction, linking routes from many directions, and provided easy passage to travellers to India, China, Tibet, Central Asia and Afghanistan and beyond to Iran and the Arab lands.

Chinese records of the sixth century AD mention Wakhan as being situated along the route used by traders and Chinese pilgrims on their way to Buddhist shrines in northern India. It also formed a part of the 4,200 miles (6,720 kilometers) long "The Great Old Road" or "The Great Road to the North West", which starting from China crossed the Gobi desert, skirted the Takla Makan wastes and reaching Kashgar passed on to Central Asia either through Karategin, Farghana and Kokand oases, or followed a southern route through Tashkurghan and Wakhan. These strategic trade routes passed through the Little Pamir and the Great Pamir area and the Panja and upper Amu rivers valleys of Wakhan.

Some of the greatest intrepid travellers of the past — Hsuan Tsang, Al Idrisi and Marco Polo — did not fail to mention Wakhan in their accounts. It was only much later, when sea borne trade gradually eclipsed the pack animal caravans and the powerful empires were replaced by small squabbling kingdoms that Wakhan lost much of its utility as an important route. By the end of the nineteenth century when the terrible rivalry between Britain and Russia concluded in a division of territories, Wakhan was pushed into obscurity to act like a hedge. Its golden period was over and the endless caravans laden with choice merchandise were replaced by an occasional train of a Kirghiz group on an annual trek to greener pastures. Even this movement diminished as political changes placed the salient in the shadow of two powerful revolutionary powers.

Till 1979, Wakhan had hardly any metalled road and travel was almost impossible by vehicular means except for a brief distance. In the rest of the salient mere tracks were available. The only thoroughfare was a dirt road which linked Faizabad, the main city of Badakhshan province with Wakhan through Zebak, reaching Ishashim town, situated at an elevation of 8,700 feet (2,610 meters) in the west. From Ishkashim the road skirting the left bank of Amu darya reached Khandud, the administrative headquarter of Wakhan. Moving eastwards the road terminated at Qala Panja, and further progress was possible along trails by pack animals. From Qala Panja the trails led to both the Pamirs. The 100 kilometers journey to the Great Pamir took five to seven days involving a gradual ascent of

4,500 feet (1,350 meters) and was useable for most of the year. The southern route to Little Pamir, less than 200 kilometers involving a similar ascent took eight to twelve days. Besides the trail was safest for travel only for a few months in winter when the Sarhad river was frozen. A single telephone line connected Faizabad with Gaz Khan, but the line was mainly for border patrol posts along the Amu river.

In the last five years the communication system has greatly improved allowing for easy movement by even heavy vehicles. Jeepable roads have now replaced many of the difficult trails which were once difficult even for such Pamir pack animals like the sure-footed yaks. Portions of the Faizabad-Zebak-Ishkashim-Qala Panja dirt road have been metalled to cater to heavy vehicles, but roads from Qala Panja onwards are fit for jeeps only. The trail from Qala Panja to the Great Pamir has, however, been extended to Kyzil Rabat in Russian territory. Similarly the tortuous Qala Panja route to Bozai Gumbaz has been upgraded and improved. In some other places the foot-tracks have been replaced by jeepable mule-tracks, but the distances in most cases are small. These segments include the Zebak-Dorah pass link, the Sarhad-Baroghil pass link, and two tracks leading from Bozai Gumbaz to Wakhjir and Irshad passes. The turbulent Amu river has been successfully bridged at Ishkashim and Qala Panja allowing for movement of heavy vehicles. Air travel facility has also been introduced in the salient with the construction of a few landing strips fit only for light aircraft and helipads. The Afghan government was already using helicopters for ferrying hunters to the reserves for Marco Polo sheep in the inaccessible areas.

Habitations: There are no towns of any size in Wakhan and the main centres of population are villages, big and small dotting the shores of the three main rivers. Khandud in the west, the administrative headquarter of the district, has a population of about 200 people and boasts of the only bazar in the corridor. Except for Ishkashim and Qala Panja villages situated in the valleys which bear their names and where cultivation in some measure is possible, the other villages are either very small hamlets or camping grounds for Kirghiz people. Most of these villages are merely transitting points for travellers who cross the passes for their onward journey.

The People: Wakhan is populated by two distinct nationalities — the indigenous Wakhis or Wakhanis and the pastoral Kirghiz. The population of both is fairly small and except for an increase in the number of Kirghiz after the Russian revolution in the 1920's and later in the early 1950's after the Chinese revolution, there has been no further infusion. However, in the beginning of the current decade, the Kirghiz population recorded a sharp decrease due to their large-scale migration to Pakistan as a result of the Soviet intrusion in Afghanistan.

The Wakhis are of ancient Iranian stock from the Turkestan region of Central Asia and their dialect (also called Ghalcha) is an old Indo-Iranian dialect. Some authorities lump the Wakhis along with other small communities in the Pamirs and adjoining region under the general term of Pamiri or mountain Tajiks and suggest their 'Pamiri dialects' belong to the East Iranian group of languages. The other Pamiri communities mentioned are the Badzhuis, Bartangis, Khufis, Ishkashimis, Shugnis, Rushanis and Yazgulemis. Their basic physical type is described as Mediterranean substock with mongoloid features.

The Wakhis belong to the Ismailia Shia sect of Islam which is also practiced by their neighbours in Shignan, Zebak and in Hunza and Chitral in Pakistan. One source opines that the Ismailia sect reached the region in the eleventh century. According to another writer this small colony of Ismaili Shias in the salient and adjoining valleys was "regarded with unconcealed contempt" by the orthodox Sunnis of Badakhshan and Turkic Central Asia and attempts were made to convert them. The legal and judicial system of Afghanistan was Sunni-based and the administrative machinery Sunni dominated, and this has always acted as an irritant to the Shia population of these areas.

The ethnic background of the Kirghiz is still not clear, but they are variously believed to be of Mongol, Uralic or independent northern origin. It is, however, argued that they are not of Turkic stock but were Turkicised very early. Their language belongs to the northwestern group of Turki languages. Chinese chronicles identify a people with Kirghiz under the name of *Kien-Kuen*, but the name *Kyrgyz* is first found in the early Turkic Orkhon inscriptions of eighth century AD. The Kirghiz were at that time settled in the Upper Yenisei and it was only in 840 AD that they emerged as a political force when they overthrew the Uighar state in northwest Mongolia and occupied the lands between the Upper Yenisei and Orkhon rivers. After the usual developments and upheavals of history, nineteenth century found the Kirghiz in Tien Shan range, the Pamirs and Chinese Turkestan. The Russian expansion in Central Asia followed by the suppression of the Andijan rebellion resulted in the migration of more Kirghiz to the fastness of the Pamirs. Their number continued to be augmented by fresh waves of Kirghiz escaping Russian reprisal after the failure of liberation movements. The emergence of Soviet Russia brought about a fresh exodus of Kirghiz to the Pamirs, and by 1921, the Kirghiz numbered about 2,000 in Afghan Pamirs. In the 1940's some Kirghiz families moved to Badakhshan and others to Taghdumbash Pamir in Chinese Turkestan/Xinjiang, but these again returned to Wakhan after the success of the Chinese revolution. They lived in peace in the corridor for thirty years till the Soviet intrusion in 1980 forced them to make yet another joyless migration to Pakistan. From Pakistan the long-suffering Kirghiz families finally went to a sympathetic Turkey for settlement — a country with which they claimed kindred relations.

The Kirghiz are Sunnis (Hanafi school) and were converted to Islam in the mid-sixteenth century. Sufi movement played an important part in their conversion to Islam and the Naqshbandi order was particularly strong in the region. They became devout Muslims, which reason was partly responsible for their continuous migrations to places of safety.

While the Wakhis represent the settled population of the corridor practising agriculture, the Kirghiz still lead a nomadic life rearing domestic animals. They largely inhabit the two Pamirs in the eastern portion of the salient, while the Wakhis are found in the two valleys in the western end.

Nazif Mohib Shahrani, an Afghan student who made an anthropological study of the salient in 1972 and 1973 and was the last scholar to visit the area, put the number of Wakhis at 6,000 and the Kirghiz at 1,800 in 1972-74. However, Shahrani gives the population estimates of the two peoples by the Afghan government, published in the *Provisional Gazetteer of Afghanistan, 1975*, being based on separate estimates for 1965 by the ministries of agriculture and interior. The interior ministry figures

are Wakhis: 3,492 and Kirghiz: 801. The agriculture ministry estimates are: Wakhis 4,650 and Kirghiz 5,600. These wide discrepancies in the figures are not explained by Shahrani, but it is possible that the estimates were made in different seasons, when the Kirghiz were or were not in a particular area at the time of the count.

EARLY HISTORY

When the British and Russian strategists together created the corridor, it did not entail merely the patching together of odd pieces of unclaimed barren territory as was made out by a succession of officials involved in the task. The area was not *ultima Thule* and was known to history. In fact, China the most powerful power in the region had already realised the importance of the salient over one and a half millennium ago. Chinese chronicles of as early as sixth century AD provide detailed description of the corridor almost like a piece of present day military intelligence. They not only provided information about the size and shape and topography of the area, but its demography and political conditions.

Long before Wakhan had assumed any political shape, it along with the adjacent areas formed a part of the Persian empire of Cyrus I of the Achaemenian dynasty in sixth century BC; in the fourth century BC it was briefly conquered by Alexander, and after his death it formed a part of the Graeco-Bactrian empire. The Scythians (Sakas) overran the region in the first century AD, but in turn were replaced by the Greater *Yueh Chih*, a people identified as Tokharians, and thereafter the region came to be known as Tokharistan. It was in this period that the salient was first mentioned in Chinese chronicles. Annals of the former Han dynasty of China name Wakhan as *Hsui-mi* and describe it as the first of the five territories ruled by the Jabgus (*Shih-hu*) which belonged to the great *Yueh-chih* nation after its conquest of the regions south of the Oxus. In the *Pei-shih's* records of the T'ang dynasty in the early part of the seventh century AD, it bore the name of *Ch'ieh-pei* and its capital was named as Ho-mo. Sung Yun and his fellow pilgrim Hui-sheng, who passed through the valley in 519 AD on their way from Sarikol to Udyana give a description of Wakhan which they name as the kingdom of *Po-ho*. (Udyana, an important Buddhist pilgrimage centre was believed to be somewhere in the present upper Swat).

Sung Yun narrates that after crossing the Ts'ung-ling Mountains (Pamirs) from the side of Han-p'an-t'o (Sarikol) the travellers entered the kingdom of Po-ho. According to Aurel Stein, from Sung Yun's reference to 'high mountains and deep gorges and perilous paths' it appears probable that the pilgrim followed the route which leads down the Ab-i-Panja to Sarhad, for the description is far more appropriate to this route than to that across the Great Pamir. Both the pilgrims in their accounts particularly referred to the extreme cold in the valley, the high mountains - "from afar they look like peaks of jade" — and the people who dressed in furs and felt, and feed "only on cakes and roasted corn ... drink corn brandy". Hui-sheng also points out that two routes lead from Wakhan "one goes west to the Yeh-tas (Hephthalites); the other leads south-west towards Wu-ch'ang (or Udyana). This, too, is ruled by the Yeh-tas".

It was during the T'ang dynasty that China embarked on a policy of expansionism towards Central Asia, and possibly Wakhan and Pamirs came under Chinese control, for the salient, now referred to as *Po-ho* is found in the list of administrative districts into which the Central

Asian dominions of the Western Turks were organised after their conquest by China in 658. A full account of the territory is supplied by one of the notices which the T'ang annals devote to the 'Western region'. It is based in part on Hsuan-tsang's account. Hsuan-tsang was a celebrated Chinese Buddhist pilgrim who after fifteen years travel and study in India and Afghanistan returned to China by way of Wakhan in 644. His account states that "the country of *Hu-mi* is called also *Ta-mo-hsi-t'ie-ti* or *Huo-k'an*; this is the country which was known as Po-ho under Wei. It also forms part of the ancient kingdom of the Tu-huo-lo or Tokharistan. ... It measures sixteen hundred li from east to west; from north to south it is confined, measuring only four to five li across. The King resides in Sai-chia-shen; on the north it is bordered by the River Wu-hu or Oxus. The soil is frozen with cold; inequalities of the ground cause ups and downs; sand and stones spread everywhere. The land produces beans and corn; it favours trees and fruits; it produces excellent horses. The people's eyes show a greenish iris. ... The territory is on the route which leads from the 'Four Garrisons' (or Chinese Turkestan) to the Tu-huo-lo (or Tokaristan). At one time it was dependent on the Tibetans." Aurel Stein believes that *Sai-chia-shen* corresponds to the present Ishkashem, a large group of villages in the western extremity of Wakhan.

Chinese control over Wakhan continued through the eighth century. The T'ang annals give details of the Chinese administration and mention the Turkish influence on the ruling family. It is not clear whether the ruler was of Turkish stock, but the annals refer to him by the Turkish title of *Chieh-li-fa*. He was made the prefect of Wakhan by the Chinese emperor who gave him a brevet of investiture. The Wakhan ruler whose name is given as Hu-chen-t'an, is on record as having paid homage in 727 and 729, and in 741 paid a personal visit to the imperial court. The Buddhist faith was in vogue in the territory as the Chinese records refer to the existence of convents and a famous Vihara.

The last Chinese mention of Wakhan in the T'ang period is by Wu-k'ung, who passed through the corridor in 851 on his way from Kashgar to Chu-wei or Mastuj (in Chitral). Wu-k'ung mentions the 'kingdom of Hu-mi' which he reached after successfully crossing the 'the Onion Mountains' (Ts'ung-ling), 'the passes of Yang-yu' and 'the kingdom of the five Ch'ih-ni (or Shih-ni) of the valley of Po-mi.' Aurel Stein says the last mentioned undoubtedly means the Pamirs, and 'the kingdom of the five Chi'ih-ni (or Shih-ni)' is Shugnan.

It was probably in the mid-eighth century that Wakhan was threatened by Tibetan invasion from the south across the Baroghil pass. The Tibetans, for some time had been extending their line of advance from the southeast, having already occupied areas now known as Chitral, Hunza, Gilgit etc. The Chinese encyclopaedia *Tse fu yuan kusi* records the text of a brevet issued by the imperial chancellery to an envoy from Hu-mi or Wakhan, who had been sent by the son of the ruling chief to express his desire to break with the Tibetans. The Chinese met the Tibetan threat by despatching a force under the command of the celebrated Chinese general Kao Hsein-chin in 747. The Chinese force advanced from Kashghar, across the Taghdumbash Pamir, through the Wakhjir Pass to confront the Tibetan army at its stronghold at Lien-yun, which is fixed at present day Sarhad village. The Chinese advancing from the west, north and east crossed the Ab-i-Panja and engaged the Tibetans in a decisive battle, although brief (two hours), and inflicted a total defeat. Five thousand of the enemy were killed,

1,000 taken prisoner and rest fled. The Chinese took more than 1,000 horses and a lot of warlike stores and arms. This was perhaps the last time when Wakhan received Chinese mention, as a few years later, the Chinese army was defeated by the advancing Muslim army, helped by rebellious Turkic tribes at Tashkent, and the Tibetans occupied the Tarim basin for almost a century. Thereafter, for nearly a thousand years, Wakhan is not mentioned in Chinese accounts.

However, the last Chinese accounts make it clear that Wakhan till the eighth century was bordered by Tibetan territory to the south, Tokaristan to the west and independent Oxus hill kingdoms to the north. The Chinese interest in maintaining their influence over this narrow corridor suggests their desire to ensure the free passage of trade and pilgrims. Another interesting aspect was that Wakhan somehow retained its earliest inhabitants, who spoke an Eastern Iranian dialect, as different from the Turkic language which had spread over Central Asia and in Chinese Turkestan.

In latter times, Wakhan was probably influenced by the powerful forces that were building up in Central Asia and Sinkiang, both of which had come under the banner of Islam. Wakhan next finds a mention in history when the Moroccan geographer and traveller, Abu Abdulla Mohammed Al Idrisi visited the region in the early twelveth century. It is probable that the old route across the Pamirs was still in use, as Al Idrisi follows the route. He speaks of Wakhan and Sacnia as two dependencies of the country of Turks, which would suggest that the Pamirs were controlled by a Central Asian khanate. Al Idrisi further states that "Wakhan possesses silver mines, gold is taken from the rivers. Musk and slaves are also taken from this country. Sacnia town, which belongs to the Khizilji Turks, is five days from Wakhan, and its territory adjoins China." It was about a century after Al Idrisi's visit, that Central Asia (then part of the Khwarzmian empire), Sinkiang, Afghanistan, Iran and Baghdad were shaken by the Mongol earthquake. Pamirs, and possibly Wakhan was under control of the Kara Khitai empire — a dominion in Chinese Turkestan (Sinkiang), which was sufficiently strong to push the powerful Seljuks back. This is further borne out by the fact that the last Kara Khitai emperor, Guchluk, after his defeat by the Mongol army had fled to the Pamirs, chased by the victorious Mongols.

By the thirteenth century, most of Asia, excluding India and parts of South East Asia were under Mongol rule. It was at this period that the Venetian adventurer Marco Polo passed through Wakhan, on his way to the court of Kublai Khan, the Mongol ruler of China. Marco Polo narrates: "in leaving Badashan you ride twelve days east and north-east, ascending a river that runs through land belonging to a brother of the Prince Badashan, containing a good many towns and villages and scattered habitations. The people are Mahommetans, and valiant in war. At the end of those twelve days you come to a province of no great size, extending indeed no more than three days' journey in any direction, and this is called Vokhan. The people worship Mahommet and they have a peculiar language. They are gallant soldiers, and they have a chief whom they call None, which is as much to say *Count*, and they are liegemen of the Prince of Badashan."

Aurel Stein points out that Qala Panja in Marco's days, as at present, was the chief place of Wakhan is indicated also by his narrative of the next stage of his journey. "And when you leave this little country, and ride three days north-east, always among mountains, you

get to such a height that 'its said to be the highest place in the world! And when you have got to this height you find a great lake between two mountains, and out of it a fine river running through a plain. ... The plain is called Pamir." The lake mentioned by Marco Polo is the Zor Kul or Sir-i-Kul, which makes it clear that he followed the traditional route along the Ab-i-Panja to the Great Pamir, from there crossing over to Taghdumbash Pamir on way to Kashghar. Wakhan's later fortunes followed the general pattern of political developments in Central Asia. It later came under the sway of the Tirmurids, and afterwards the Mughal rulers of India, whose domain extended across Afghanistan, briefly held the Pamirs. In the early part of the nine-tenth century, the Uzbeg rulers of Kunduz subjugated many of the Pamir states, including Badakshan.

The region acquired some importance as the British and Russian advances appeared to clash in the Pamirs. Afghanistan had always laid claim not only to Badakshan but its three dependencies — Roshan, Shugnan and Wakhan, and it was on the basis of these claims, that Amir Abdur Rahman added the territories to his domain. The other claimant was the state of Bokhara, initially in its capacity as an independent kingdom, and later as a vassal of Tzarist Russia. This aspect of the history is given in detail in this paper upto the time of its conversion into a buffer between Russian and British areas of influence in the Pamir region.

However, an interesting anecdote may be related here about the last days of Wakhan's ruler — Ali Mardan Khan, just before the salient was finally assimilated into Afghanistan. After Wakhan had been added to Afghanistan through the 1873 agreement between Britain and Russia, the Afghan ruler, Amir Abdur Rahman had apparently appointed Ali Mardan Khan, the ruler of Wakhan to look after the territory. In 1883, Amir Abdur Rahman replaced the ruler by his governor, Ghafar Khan Kirghiz. Col. R.C.F. Schomberg in his book *"Between the Oxus and the Indus"* recounts a sad incident about the replacement of the ruler. Schomberg does not name the source of his information, nor does he say anything about the authenticity of the story, but it does make interesting reading. According to Schomberg, a *durbar* of the mirs and rulers of the states in the Pamirs was called by Amir Abdur Rahman in 1883. The Afghan Amir had written a promise of safety to the rulers in a copy of the Holy Quran, which was signed by him, his sons and 600 notables. The local rulers duly reached the Afghan camp at Khanabad where the viceroy of the Amir, Alam Khan, Naib-i-Hukumat of Badakhshan was staying. At the start of the proceedings, Alam Khan quoted a verse from the poet Nizami which said 'make doubly certain you have not come rashly".

Schomberg continues: "The Tajik rulers were frightened when they heard this, for the ominous import was not lost on them. Ali Mardan Khan, Mir of Wakhan, at once fell on his hands and knees, and crawled through the crowded Durbar of the Naib to kiss his feet. The Viceroy bade him rise and walk. 'No', said the Mir, 'I am a dog of the God-given empire of Afghanistan. When a dog comes to its master it comes on four legs not two. So do I.' The Naib was pleased at this submission and ordered the Mir to leave the court. He did so, and at once went to his horse, mounted it and rode away." The Mir later fled with his family for protection to Aman-ul-Mulk, the Mehtar of Chitral, whose sister he had married. The Mehtar gave him Ishkoman, where he lived till his death in 1924.

Apart from Wakhan's historic relations with Badakhshan, Turkestan (Sinkiang) and other states, it also had very close ties with the states on the south of the Hindu Kush, particularly Chitral and Hunza. Both these states were connected with the salient through passes which encouraged the free movement of trade and political communication. There are also instances when rebels and unsuccessful claimants to one or the other rulership of the many northern states fled to Wakhan for refuge. Besides, there also existed links between the ruling families on both sides of the Hindu Kush through inter-marriage.

The former state of Hunza once claimed large pieces of Wakhan's territory in the east and in the Little Pamir. During the rule of Mir Ghazanfar Khan in the 1860's, the Hunza territory supposedly included Gojak and Bozai Gumbaz in Wakhan. The Hunza claim was, however, ignored when the Wakhan buffer was shaped from bits of supposed no-man's land. A result of the fixing of the permanent boundary in the north was the loss to Hunza of grazing rights in the rich pasture lands in the eastern pamirs.

(Material for this chapter on Wakhan's background, ethnography, history and geography has been collected from a number of publications. These include Sir Aurel Stein, *Sirindia* Vol.I, Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, second edition, 1980, pp.60-66; Col. Sir Thomas Holdich, *Gates of India*, Gosha-e-Adab, Quetta, 1977, (first published in 1910); Mir Mushi Sultan Mahomed Khan, *The Life of Abdur Rahman, Amir of Afghanistan*, Vol. II, Oxford University Press, Karachi, 1980; Shirin Akiner, *Islamic Peoples of the Soviet Union*, Kegan Paul Ltd., London, 1983; Nazif Mohib Shahrani's dissertation for doctorate on Wakhan; Maj. Gen. S. Shahid Hamid (Retd.), *Karakuram Hunza: The Land of Just Enough*, Ma'aref Limited, Karachi, 1979; Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, second printing, 1978; Colonel R.C.F. Schomberg, *Between the Oxus and the Indus*, Sind Sagar Academy, Lahore (date not given).

SCENARIO (CIRCA 1830's)

Wakhan in the historical perspective, represents the final chapter of the bloody scramble for Central and South Asian territory by Tzarist Russia and imperial Britain during the nineteenth century. As the land grabbing operations of the two powers reached culmination in the Pamirs and the fringes of the territories they had usurped or brought under their hegemony reached a precipitous point of overlap, the Wakhan promontory was devised as a lasting symbol of the co-operative *laissez-faire* between two imperialist powers. This long thin finger of Afghanistan was meant to act as a buffer to literally keep the colonies of the two powers apart, even if "at one point the Wakhan tongue is only eight miles wide ... at another point further east is an easy 12,000 ft. pass, the Baroghil, leading from northern Chitral into Wakhan, whence it is possible to look straight across to Russian territory on the Pamirs."(4) Wakhan, in fact was a refinement of the British buffer doctrine to an absurd degree compounded by its ludicrous application in a geographical situation where it became a mere formality. Britain's anxiety to immure India, its richest colony, from foreign influence was the reason that resulted in the creation of the strange screen. However, to appreciate the factors that led to the making of the salient, it is necessary to have an idea of the circumstances prevailing at the time when the 'great game' was being played in Central and South Asia.

By the 1830's, Britain or more appropriately the British East India Company had occupied or brought under its direct influence much of the Indian subcontinent except the areas now comprising Pakistan and the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The Sutlej river served as a border of sorts between British India and the Sikh empire, which stretched from Multan in the south to Peshawar in the north. The ruler of the empire, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, starting as the governor of Lahore appointed by the Afghan ruler Shah Zaman in 1798 had gradually occupied most of Afghanistan's dependencies in India. This included the trans-Indus areas in the west, the territory of Peshawar and the province of Jammu and Kashmir. There apparently was a certain degree of British backing for Ranjit Singh in his usurpation of Afghan territory, as later events proved. W.K. Fraser-Tytler in his book *Afghanistan* gives a graphic account of the British governor-general Lord Auckland's decision to support Ranjit Singh against the request of the Afghan ruler at Kabul, Dost Mohammad Khan, to help him regain Peshawar from the Sikhs in exchange for Afghan friendship with the British.(5) Capt Alexander Burnes who was sent by Lord Auckland in 1837 on a commercial mission to Afghanistan to meet the chiefs, but in reality to seek Afghan support, was specifically instructed by the chief secretary of India, William Macnaghten, that "under any circumstances our first feeling must be that of regard for the honour and just wishes of our old and firm ally Ranjit Singh".(6) Probably the main reason for the British support for the Sikhs was that they "were regarded not only a valuable allies but also as an outer line of defence against French or Russian invaders".(7)

South of Punjab, stretching on both sides of the lower reaches of the Indus down to the Arabian Sea was the state of Sind ruled by the Talpur dynasty. (Sind had for some time been a tributary of Afghanistan, but with the decline of central authority in the Durrani empire in the aftermath of the bitter power struggle among various claimants, it had become independent). To the west of Sind, beyond the Kirthar range, was the Baluch-Brahui confederacy of Baluchistan. Its western border reached Persia and in the north it was bounded by Afghanistan. (Like Sind, Baluchistan too had been a tributary of Afghanistan but had also assumed independence.)

Afghanistan of the 1830's was somewhat larger than what ultimately became of it after the depredations of the British and the Russians. The Durrani empire founded in 1747 by Ahmed Shah Abdali had fallen on unfortunate times with authority in Afghanistan being claimed by rulers holding three important power centres. Dost Mohammad Khan, one of the Barakzai brothers and the most powerful, held the important city of Kabul and also controlled Ghazni and Jalalabad. By 1836 he had assumed the title of Amir. Kandahar was ruled by two other brothers of Dost Mohammad Khan — Kohandil Khan and Purdil Khan, while Herat in western Afghanistan was held by Kamran Mirza, the last scion of the ruling Saddozai family of the Durranis. Dost Mohammad Khan had only a few years earlier lost his north-west Indian principalities to the Sikh ruler, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, and two attempts made by him to regain Peshawar from the Sikhs in 1835 and 1836 had failed.

In the west, Herat was under seige by the Persians who reportedly had the support of Russia, both politically and materially. It was at this period (1837) that Captain Alexander Burnes was sent to meet the rulers of Afghanistan, ostensibly for talks of a commercial nature, but in fact, to sound out the Afghans for a possible agreement with

the British power in India to prevent Russian and Persian inroads in that country. As was mentioned earlier, Dost Muhammad Khan's most important condition — regaining Peshawar — in exchange for Afghan support to Britain against the Persians and Russians had already been turned down by Lord Auckland. Burnes' mission failed and the Kabul ruler reportedly turned towards Russia for help in acquiring his eastern possession of Peshawar from the Sikhs.

The seige of Herat ended in 1838 largely because the Persian investing army was unable to overcome the resistance of the Afghans even after nine months and partly as a result of the occupation of the Kharg island in the Gulf by a British force sent from India. Tehran was unwilling to risk a war with Britain.

The British had for some time followed an ephemeral policy towards Afghanistan. At the beginning of nineteenth century, Britain had sought Persian help in containing the Afghan ruler, Shah Zaman, whose frequent forays into India were affecting British economic interests. A few years later, as the chimera of a French threat to India from the west across Persia loomed large on the horizon, Britain sought to bolster Afghanistan and the Sikh empire as two lines of defence of India. Hardly had Emperor Napoleon been exiled to a brooding end and the French threat dissipated, than Britain visualised a fresh new peril in the shape of Russian advance towards India by way of Persia and Afghanistan. The seige of Herat on the western flank of the Hindu Kush fitted well into the strategic jigsaw puzzle that was being evolved by the British colonial power in India. The last piece to be added to the puzzle was the fear that Dost Muhammad Khan was beginning to liaise with the Russians against the British. How much of this is true is not clear, as the Kabul ruler had shown Captain Burnes his correspondence with the Tzar and sought his advice before meeting the Russian agent, Captain Ivan Viktorovich Vitkevich (also spelled Vicovich, Vickovich, Vitkievitch). After the Persians had given up the Herat adventure, Russia had recalled its representative in Tehran, Count Simonich and Vitkevich's credentials were repudiated.(8) Nevertheless, the "hawks" on Lord Auckland's staff won over the "doves" and it was decided to undertake another adventure in Afghanistan(9) — that of replacing Dost Muhammad Khan by the former Saddozai ruler of Kabul, Shuja-ul-Mulk — and correcting what the British obviously considered a serious aberration in their strategy. Thus took place the First Anglo-Afghan war of 1839-42 which initiated a series of blunders by Britain and expedited the Tzarist advance into Central Asia.

At the time Britain was preparing to make its first major move towards Afghanistan, the Tzarist Russian empire's southward advance was confined to areas north of the Sea of Aral. This region was being consolidated by the imperial forces along, what was known as the Orenburg-Siberia line of forts. The Russian aim in this inhospitable area was largely trade and protecting their economic interests, that is the trading caravans which went south to the khanates in Central Asia.(10) Evidently, Russia, at the time was not particularly interested in expanding southwards as its attention was diverted by other more pressing circumstances. "With Turkey controlling the Dardanelles and thus frustrating Russia's ambition of access to the Mediterranean, the Eastern Question, as it came to be called, was a great deal more urgent than the control of the locally troublesome

Kazakhs in Central Asia, or the southern khanates. For those reasons, Count Nesselrode, who became Foreign Minister in 1816 and who held the post till 1856, was constantly more concerned with Europe than with the Central Asian matters."(11)

Thus by the end of the 1830's Central Asia comprised of the three independent khanates of Bokhara, Kokand and Khiva, besides a number of smaller ill-defined principalities, largely of Turkmen. The Tzarist forces were stationed in northern Kazak steppes, while in the south the Qajar dynasty ruled over a much weakened Persia and Afghanistan was in a chaotic state with three claimants to power and a fourth one bidding his time in India under British patronage. In the east the Pamirs formed a natural boundary for Central Asia with the decaying Chinese empire, while in the west beyond the Caspian Sea, the Russians had annexed territory reaching to the Persian border. The British military power was confined to India south of the Sutlej, with hawkish officials preparing for an offensive move against Afghanistan.

GREAT GAME: FIRST ROUND

Britain had strategic interest in Afghanistan, in that it visualised the Hindu Kush state as a natural shield for India, but the East India Company also looked upon Afghanistan as a gateway to the rich markets of Central Asia. "... the trade routes to Central Asia led from Kandahar, Kabul and Peshawar to India. The returning caravans carried the products not only to these Khanates but also to Kokand and Bokhara."(12) After all the primary *raison d'etre* of the Company was trade, and conquest was a secondary but necessary compulsion. John C. Griffiths points out that "As mercantile interest developed into political involvement, so the latter engendered a British military presence. ... Thus the British found themselves constantly obliged to extend the areas under their military control in order to maintain the stability necessary for trade."(13) The economic interest in north-western neighbours of India was "the outcome of the reports of a number of British agents and travellers who in the previous half-century had penetrated beyond the Indus, and reached even as far as the Caspian Sea. In so doing they had covered much country and brought back with them optimistic reports of the prospects of Central Asian trade".(14) Devendra Kaushik refers to the reconnaissance work carried out by Meer Izzut Oollah at the instance of William Moorcroft, a senior official of the Company. The Meer travelled in 1812 from Attock to Kashmir, Tibet, Yarkand, Kashgar, Kokand, Samarkand, Bokhara, Balkh, Khulma, Bamian and Kabul (15). Another agent was Captain Alexander Burnes who led an expedition to Bokhara in early thirties. Mohan Lal, a Kashmiri Pandit who accompanied Burnes was of the opinion that the climate for establishing "commercial or political" relations by the British with Bokhara was extremely favourable.(16)

All these activities were obviously noticed by the Russian authorities who were inclined to look upon Central Asia with greater "neighbourliness" than probably the British. Count Nesselrode in a despatch dated October 20, 1838 to the Russian ambassador in London noted:

> ...indefatigable activity displayed by English travellers in spreading disquiet among the people of Central Asia, and in carrying agitation even into the heart of the countries bordering on our

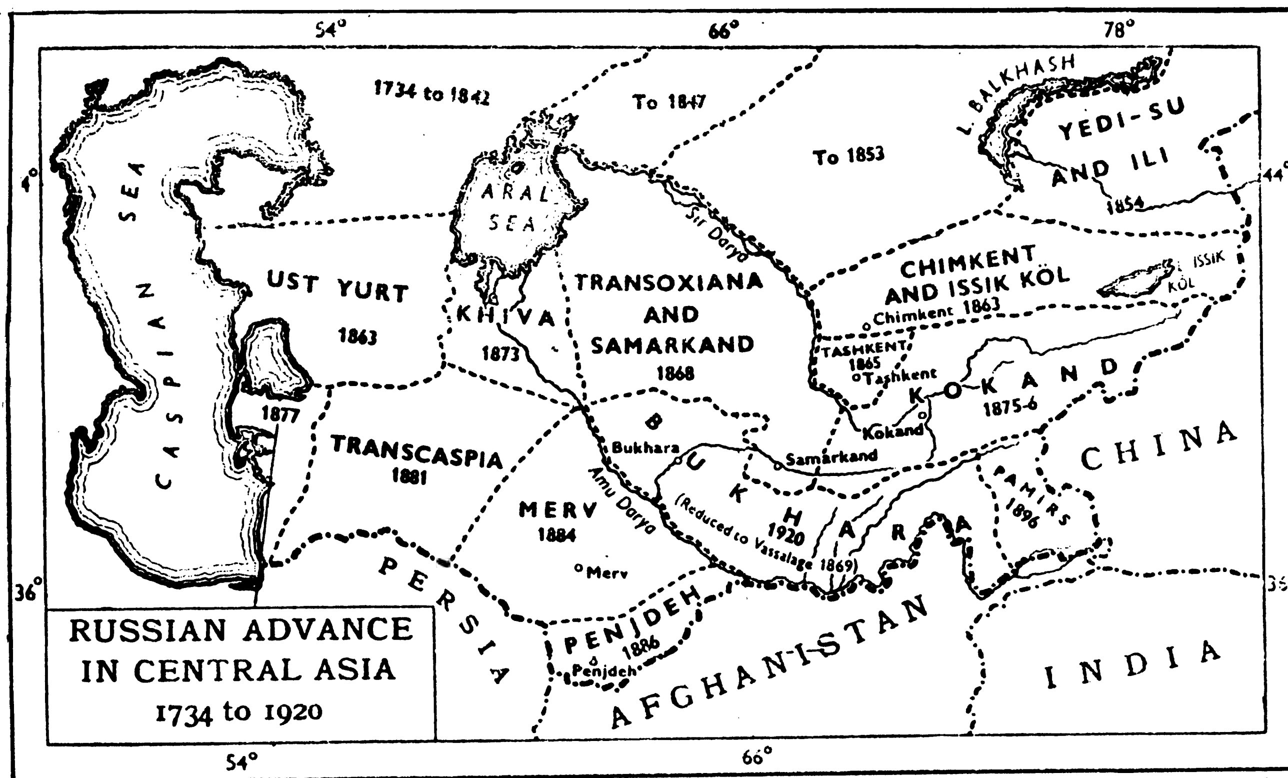
> frontiers; while on our part we ask nothing but to be admitted to (share) in fair competition the commercial advantages of Asia. English industry, exclusive and jealous, would deprive us entirely of the benefits which it (claims) to reap alone; and would cause, if it could, the produce of our manufacturers to disappear from all the markets of Central Asia.(17)

Although Tzarist Russia had developed a nascent industrial infrastructure by the beginning of the nineteenth century it is doubtful whether it had reached a level where it competed with British industry. In fact, the proportion of Central Asian trade to the whole foreign trade of Russia was still insignificant even in the mid-nineteenth century, being little more than 2.5 per cent.(19) Much of Russian economic interest in Central Asia was a development of later years, well past the fifties of the nineteenth century. The case Count Nesselrode was preparing aginst the British with a heavy leavening of trade interest, was essentially to pre-empt Britain's possible intrusion into Central Asia.

Although the seige of Herat was over and the Russian influence in Afghanistan had faded away, Lord Auckland had already decided to undertake a military-political gamble by replacing the ruler in Kabul. He had a *carte-blanche* from the secret committee of the Court of Directors of the East India Company which requested him to adopt "any other measures that may appear to you to be desirable in order to counteract Russian influence in that quarter (Afghanistan)".(20) The "Army of the Indus" which was mustered at Ferozepur earlier in response to the Herat seige was now diverted to the task of the Afghan adventure. An ultimatum — termed a manifesto — had earlier (October 1, 1838) been issued by the governor-general to Dost Muhammad Khan which made it clear that:

> The welfare of our possessions in the East requires that we should have on our western frontier an ally who is interested in resisting aggression, and establishing tranquillity, in the place of chiefs ranging themselves in subservience to a hostile power, and seeking to promote schemes of conquest and aggrandizement.(21)

Thus began the First Anglo-Afghan War in November 1938. The war is beyond the purview of this paper, but suffice it to say that when the operation finally ended in 1842, Britain had suffered a major military and political setback. Dost Muhammad Khan was back in power, the claimant supported by Britain, Shah Shuja was killed and the phantom of a Russian push southwards, which was a favourite bogey of the British, had finally materialised. Nesselrode had already sounded the alarm about British intentions in Central Asia. The Russian ambassador in Tehran, Count Simonich, who was said to have been involved in the Persian seige of Herat, had repeatedly warned his superiors in St. Petersburg of British intentions in Afghanistan. He believed that the establishment of British control over Afghanistan would represent a step towards hegemony over Central Asia and perhaps over Iran too.(22) Consequently it was not unexpected that the first British thrust towards Afghanistan would activitate a sharp Russian response. "The British advance northward, and particularly the two



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invasions of Afghanistan, were regarded in St. Petersburg as an attempt by Great Britain to establish herself north of the Hindu Kush and forestall Russia in the markets of Central Asia."(23) The 'Great Game had begun. British had fired the first salvo, the Russians replied in less than a year's time.

On November 8, 1838, the British governor-general had issued a sort of a declaration of war against Afghanistan saying that he would "prosecute with vigour the measures which have been announced with a view to the substitution of a friendly for a hostile power in the eastern provinces of Afghanistan..."(24), and exactly one year later (November 1839) a sizeable Russian force under the command of General V. Perovsky marched towards the khanate of Khiva. Like Britain, the Tzarist authorities also issued a manifesto:

> The rights of Russia, the security of her trade, the tranquillity of her subjects, and the dignity of the state call for decisive measures; and the Emperor has judged it to be time to send a body of troops to Khiva, to put an end to robbery and exaction, to deliver those Russians who are detained in slavery, to make the inhabitants of Khiva esteem and respect the Russian name, and finally to strengthen in that part of Asia the lawful influence to which Russia has a right, and which alone can insure the maintenance of peace."(25)

The 'Great Game' which began in 1838 ended in 1895 in the Pamirs where the Wakhan salient became a lasting testimony to the avariciousness of the superpowers of the nineteenth century. In these approximately 57 years as many as six independent states and many more smallar dependencies and principalities lost their identity for ever.

ADVANCE OF IMPERIALISM

A chronology of the progress of British and Russian imperialisms in the nineteenth century across areas which now comprise Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia.

	YEAR	BRITAIN	RUSSIA
1.	1838-42	First Anglo-Afghan war	
2.	1839		First attack on Khiva
3.	1843	Sind annexed	
4.	1846	Kashmir ceded to Britain	
5.	1849	Punjab annexed	
6.	1854		Yedi-Su annexed
7.	1859	Parts of Baluchistan annexed	
8.	1863		Ust Yurt desert and Chimkent and Issik-kol occupied
9.	1864		Kazak steppes annexed
10.	1865		Tashkent annexed
11.	1868		Transoxiana and Samarkand annexed
12.	1869		Bokhara made vassal
13.	1873		Khiva made vassal
14.	1876	Quetta occupied	Kokand annexed
15.	1878-79	Second Anglo-Afghan war: several districts ceded to British India	
16.	1881		Transcaspia areas occupied
17.	1884		Merv Annexed
18.	1886		Panjdeh annexed
19.	1891-94	Chitral and other areas in "Dardistan" occupied	Pamirs annexed

While Tzarist Russia had made its move towards annexing Central Asia by an attack on Khiva in 1839 as an immediate reaction to the British intervention in Afghanistan in 1838, the actual Russian assault on Central Asia started after the Crimean War (1853-56) was over. In 1863, the Tzarist forces occupied two areas — Ust Yurt desert in the west and Chimkent and Issik Kol in the east — of Central Asia. After that, within three decades Russian forces had reached the northern borders of Afghanistan. In India, after the annexation of the Punjab in 1849 and except for occupation of some parts of Baluchistan in 1859, there was an interregnum in Britain's imperialism, largely due to the pressure caused by the 1857 Indian war of independence, and later the need to consolidate the vast colony. The second Anglo-Afghan war of 1878-79 fought for almost the same reason as the first, resulted in Britain acquiring large chunks of Afghan territory in the east and south. By this time Britain had reached the eastern and southern borders of Afghanistan and the Durand Line was already being marked. This required merely some mopping up operations to bring under control certain difficult tiny states occupying strategic areas adjoining the northern border with Afghanistan and China.

BUFFER THEORY

The speed of the Russian advance apparently surprised the British power in India, whose own adventure in Afghanistan had led to a disastrous debacle. In the 1830's, the view in Britain accepted the possibility of a Russian threat to India, but expected that improved British trade and relations with the Central Asian khanates would help to keep Russia at bay.(27) Another British belief was that "Russia is very weak in Asia" and the "Mahommedan races" had a strong defensive power.(28) Added to these ideas was the probability "that a defensive alliance between Khiva, Bokhara, Kokand, Persia, East Turkestan (Kashgaria), and Afghanistan would be unassailable by Russia!"(29)

Even in the 1860's John Lawrence, the viceroy in India was certain that "....Russia has indeed a task (occupation of Central Asia) before her in which she may fail and which must occupy her for generations."(30) The viceroy even believed that geography and logistics will pose a major obstacle for the Russians advancing on India as a result "they will come to the conflict toil-worn with an exhausted infantry, a broken cavalry and a defective artillery" and then "we could meet them on ground of our own choosing".(31)

All these views underwent a sudden transformation due to the lightening advance of the Tzarist forces southward with the result that Britain sought immediate counter-measures. Physically opposing Russia apparently was not considered feasible, as Popowski points out that the "English cannot compete with the Russians either in Persia or Central Asia on equal terms."(32) Britain's failure to help Persia against Russian aggression in 1804-1806 and 1809 despite their defensive and offensive treaty, signalled London's unwillingness to confront the Russians. Explaining the reason, Popowski says that "England is so unfavourably situated as compared with Russia both in Persia and in Central Asia, that she must always come off second best. Russia borders on Persia, and can at any time march into that country an army which, as the Persians know from experience, is far superior to theirs. England on the other hand can only attack Persia from the sea, which would necessitate extensive preparations on her part, and on landing she would still have a long and fatiguing march to accomplish before reaching Ispahan, let alone Tehran. England cannot protect Persia against Russia. With the best will in the world the English are not in a position to place a sufficiently strong army on the northern frontier of Persia in time to arrest Russia's triumphal march, and to force her to treat for peace. In spite of England's guarantee, Russia several times forcibly took Persian provinces."(33)

In 1864, the Russian imperial chancellor, Prince Gorchakov's circular enunciating St. Petersburg's policy on Central Asia heightened British fears of the Tzarist push southwards. Gorchakov gave a masterly explanation for Russian expansion, arguing along lines common to the European imperialists that the "interests of security on the frontier, and of commercial relations, compel the more civilised state to exercise a certain ascendancy over neighbours whose turbulence and nomad instincts render them difficult to live with. First, we have incursions and pillage to repress. In order to stop these we are compelled to reduce the tribes on our frontier to a more or less complete submission. Once this result is attained they

become less troublesome, but in their turn they are exposed to the aggression of more distant tribes."(34) The prince's theory suggests that "civilised states" are trapped in a vicious cricle of expansion, with each new advance becoming the base for the next. Although Gorchakov spoke about a "frontier" between two fixed points, but said nothing definite how far the thrust would continue.

Thus faced with the danger of the Russians ultimately reaching the borders of India, Britain made its first diplomatic move in 1869 when foreign secretary Lord Clarendon took up the issue of Russian advance in Central Asia towards the Indian frontier with the Russian ambassador in London, Baron Brunnow.(35) Clarendon "earnestly recommended the recognition of some territory as neutral between the possessions of England and Russia which should be the limit of those possessions and be scrupulously respected by both powers."(36) The foreign secretary had warned that "unless stringent precautions were adopted we should find before long that some aspiring Russian General had entered into communication with some restless or malcontent Indian Prince, and that intrigues were rife and disturbing the Indian population on the frontier against which Government would have a right to remonstrate with Russia."(37) The Russian imperial chancellor, Prince Gorchakov replied on March 27, 1869. According to Devendra Kaushik, "The Russian government agreed to the creation of such an intermediate zone and suggested the inclusion of Afghanistan in it with the view of preventing her from being annexed by Britain. ... The British government was of the view that Afghanistan, would not fulfil the condition of a neutral territory as its frontiers were ill-defined."(38) The British refusal to accept Afghanistan as a part of the neutral zone arose from British Indian government's opinion that "Afghanistan was to be secure for British influence and her neutrality could not ensure this. In fact it might positively work against British interests."(39)

After protracted negotiations between Britain and Russia which included a meeting between Lord Clarendon and Prince Gorchakov, the neutral zone idea was finally dropped. While the Russians favoured Afghanistan as the intermediate zone, the British had suggested a wide swathe of territory "apparently desert, and marked on the map as belonging to Khan of Khiva, between Afghanistan and the territory already acquired by Russia, and if agreed to, remove all fears of dissensions."(40) Britain seriously doubted Russian intentions towards Afghanistan fearing that Russia's military department may not have "dropped the idea that the Hindu Kush would ultimately form Russia's southern frontier."(41)

BOUNDARY MAKING

The next suggestion was for accepting Afghanistan's northern frontier, i.e. the Amu Darya (Oxus) as the boundary line. "This was based on the fact that the true northern frontier of Afghanistan was marked by the river Oxus from Balkh to Badakhshan which had acknowledged Amir Dost Mohammad Khan's sovereignty."(42) At the time of the talks, the ruler of Afghanistan was Amir Sher Ali Khan, son of Dost Muhammad Khan. He ascended the throne in 1863 and after the usual prolonged fratricidal warfare with his brothers and nephews which lasted for almost six years and included a two-year ouster, he fully gained power in 1869. Dost Muhammad Khan, during his second reign, 1843-63 had normalised relations with the British, and even signed two treaties with them. The first treaty signed in 1855 at Peshawar emphasised mutual peace and friendship between the two countries,

respect for each other's territorial integrity and a similarity of policy towards each other's friends and enemies. In 1857 a supplementary treaty provided 10,000 pound sterling per month to the Afghan ruler for maintaining an army capable of resisting aggression from the west and north. Anglo-Afghan relations were further strengthened by Amir Sher Ali Khan when he met viceroy Lord Mayo in January 1869 in India and was assured the friendship and support of the British government, amidst expressions of hope that the Amir would be able to establish legitimate rule over the entire kingdom.

Thus when Britain started negotiations with Russia for accepting Afghanistan's northern frontier as the boundary between the two, the British officials were treaty bound to uphold the territorial claims of Afghanistan, which at that period were far from certain. Many segments of the northern territory along the Amu Darya which were brought under Afghanistan by Dost Muhammad Khan, had gone out of Afghan control, and Amir Sher Ali's only claim to them was based on inheritance. On the other hand the British officials had already decided the limits of the territory that would constitute Afghanistan. This "included the whole tract of country from the Helmand to the Oxus and from Herat and Seistan to Peshawar. The country between Oxus and Hindukush, it was asserted, belonged to Afghanistan by right of conquest and must be allowed to remain with the Amir."(43) Apart from the actual territory held by one or the other Afghan ruler, British officials were also ensuring that any territory, to which the Afghan ruler might have a claim, but did not enjoy possession, should be included. This was done essentially for Britain's strategic interests, as in the case of the cis-Oxus areas running along the river from east to west. Sir Henry Rawlinson, the author of the "forward policy" had in a memorandum to Lord Clarendon in 1869 stressed that "on no account should the dependence of Afghan Turkestan and Badakshan (both cis-Oxus areas) on Kabul be called in question".(44)

Consequently the British officials started negotiations with the Russians, armed with nothing more than the claims of the Afghans to certain bits and pieces of territory in the north-east. For Britain, Amu Darya (or the Oxus) became the dividing line for the territories of Afghanistan and Russian controlled areas in the north, as a result Badakhshan and the independent district of Wakhan became Afghan territory. The Russians disputed this stand, arguing that Bokhara state (which had become a tributary of Russia) claimed historical possession of Darwaz, an area which lay within the northernmost loop of Amu Darya, and thus in Badakhshan. The Russians also argued that Wakhan was not a part of Afghanistan.(45) The strongest opposition to British claims for Afghanistan came from General K.P. Von Kauffmann, the Russian governor general of Turkestan.(46)

The negotiations ran into further snags on Afghan claims to certain areas in the north-west, where there was no important geographical feature like a river or range to demarcate the limits claimed by each side. Other problems faced by both the sides was the lack of accurate maps and adequate knowledge of the actual topography. ".... in the first place, all the data we have to rely on respecting these regions are very vague and uncertain. The little native testimony, that there is, is unworthy of credence. The maps are problematic and often contradictory."(47) After prolonged talks, an agreement was finally signed in 1873 betwen Britain and Russia, with the rulers of Bokhara and Afghanistan, whose territories were being

delimited, totally kept out of the negotiations. "It was only after this matter (boundary delimitation) had been finalised that the Amir was informed of the British correspondence with the Russians."(48) "An advantage which Britain unilaterally procured from Russia by the agreement was a repeated and positive assurance to treat Afghanistan outside her sphere of influence. But so far as the question of establishing a "neutral" or "intermediate" zone between the possessions of the two powers was concerned, the idea was definitely given up in 1873."(49) Russia, however, in later years renewed its suggestion for converting Afghanistan into a buffer state. Afghanistan finally got a defined border in the north, but at the same time it was indirectly pushed under British hegemony through Russian approval, without acquiescing to British suzerainty.

SECOND AFGHAN WAR

Whether Russia initially intended it or not, it evidently accepted the idea of having Afghanistan as a buffer state, over which Britain exercised full right of action. This became evident in 1875, when Prince Gorchakov in a memorandum to London declared "That Afghanistan must form this (intermediate) zone, provided the independence of that country be placed beyond the reach of any encroachment by either party." Britain made it clear that "it set the highest value on the recognition of its liberty of action in regard to Afghanistan under any cricumstances and in any event."(50) In reply Prince Gorchakov conceded that the question of an intermediate zone was over and that the two states "*under full reservation of their liberty of action,* will avoid as far as possible direct contact, as well as collision between Asiatic states that are drawn within their respective spheres of influence."(51)

The occupation of Khiva in 1873 by Tzarist forces brought the Russian presence almost to the door of Afghanistan. Only the Turkmen occupied area of Merv remained as a tenuous buffer between the Russian occupied territory and the north-western border of Afghanistan which was yet to be demarcated. Amir Sher Ali Khan sought, on the basis of the two existing treaties with Britain, money, arms and, if necessary, troops to repel aggression by Russia. The request was turned down by the British government. Consequently "Sandwiched between the two great powers, liking neither — Afghans were strongly xenophobic — he (Sher Ali) turned to Russia from whom he hoped to get better terms."(52) In any case, it is doubtful if the highly liberty minded Afghans really relished their country being drafted into the responsibility of acting as frontline state for the British colony of India. Amir Sher Ali's move to exercise the independence of his country by opening a dialogue with the Tzarist government was, therefore, no more than an expression of sovereignty and an on-going process which had started in 1870 when von Kauffmann had first communicated with the Amir. The British were fully aware of this correspondence.(53)

In the meantime, the conservative leader Disraeli became the new prime minister of Britain resulting in changes in viceroyship and other higher posts in India, with the moderates on frontier policy being replaced by the exponents of a tough forward policy. At the same time a series of developments took place in quick succession which seriously affected the situation. Amir Sher Ali's correspondence with von Kauffmann resulted in the arrival of a Russian diplomatic mission in Kabul. Britain riposted by despatching a senior political officer to Kabul, whom the Afghans refused permission to enter the country at the

border. Moreover, Britain did not get a "satisfactory" reply from the Amir to its protests. The upshot of these events was the Second Afghan war in 1878, which led to the abdication of Amir Sher Ali Khan, and the British imposed treaty of Gandamak signed by the new Amir, the pliant Yaqub Khan. Under the treaty Afghanistan ceded large chunks of territory to British India in the east and south of the country. Britain also foisted a number of political and economic articles in the treaty on Afghanistan, one of which made it clear that "the Amir engaged to adjust his relations with foreign States in accordance with England's advice, and to place them under her direct control."(54) In 1880, Sardar Abdur Rahman Khan, a nephew of Sher Ali Khan, through his half-brother, Muhammad Afzal Khan returned to Afghanistan from Russian territory and claimed the Amirship. Abdur Rahman's rule lasted till 1901, and he was responsible for making Afghanistan a cohesive and united country with well defined international borders, as well as initiating the transformation of the country so as to make it capable of meeting the challenge of the twentieth century.

Years after the Second Afghan war, viceroy Lord Curzon in explaining the British frontier policy had observed that "we do not want to occupy it (buffer area), but we also cannot afford to see it occupied by our foes. We are quite content to let it remain in the hands of our allies and friends, but if rivals and unfriendly influences creep up to it, and lodge themselves right under our walls, we are compelled to intervene ... He would be a shortsighted commander who merely manned his ramparts in India and did not look beyond."(55) Mujtaba Rizvi explains that the "British imperial frontier system in the South Asian subcontinent was intended to be a barrier system of 'buffer zones'. The Indian Empire for more than a century pursued a policy of creating Protectorates and Buffer States."(56)

GREAT GAME: LAST ROUND

While Britain was busy converting Afghanistan into a proper buffer state, the Russians continued their relentless advance into the few remaining portions of Central Asia. By 1880 Geok Tepe, the home of Turkmen tribes north of Iran was occupied after an immense slaughter. In 1881 Akhal was occupied bringing Russians forces to the north-eastern border of Iran and three years later Merv was stormed and taken by the Russians, wiping out finally the swathe of territory that still divided the northern border of Afghanistan west of Amu Darya, with Russian occupied Central Asia. While the Russians continued their steady advance, British leaders maintained a regular barrage of protests which culminated in the final Tzarist occupation of Sarrakhs along the Afghan border, and Popowski points out dryly that when the news of Sarrakhs was confirmed the "London cabinet had occasion to satisfy itself for the hundredth time of the inefficacy of diplomacy either to stay the execution of the plans laid by Russia in Central Asia, or to undo accomplished facts."(57)

The Gandamak treaty, however, faced an acid test six years later when on March 30, 1885, a Russian force under General Komarov moved southwards and inflicted a crushing defeat on the Afghan forces at Panjdeh oasis, about 100 miles due south of Merv at the confluence of the Murghab and Khushk rivers. This took place at a time when Russian and British members of joint Afghan Boundary Commission were at the spot demarcating the border between Afghanistan's Herat province and Russian Central Asian territory. Panjdeh was claimed by Afghanistan and

Britain supported this view, while Russians contested this claim, arguing on the basis of ethnography, that it was a land of the Tekke Turkmen and, therefore, a part of the Tzarist empire. British interest in ensuring the incorporation of the Panjdeh area into Afghanistan was to increase the acreage between the Tzarist boundary and Herat — the "gateway to India" — in north-west Afghanistan. Northern portion of Panjdeh area was already in Russian hands, while Afghanistan had a contingent in south.

While the tension was gradually building up over the oasis with the Russian commander deploying his forces in a provocative manner, London took up the issue with St. Petersburg. Dupree points out cynically that "Britain informed Russia that an attack on the Panjdeh would be regarded as a threat to Britain (implying that nothing would be done, however). Concerning Herat, the wording differed: if Russia attacked or even approached Herat, Her Majesty's Government would consider this a direct declaration of war."(58) The actual brawl did not last long. The Afghan force, outnumbered and outgunned fought bravely before it retreated after sustaining heavy losses. Amir Abdur Rahman, who was on a state visit to India at that time as guest of viceroy Dufferin, deplored the British neglect of Afghanistan's defence requirements.(59) "This famous (Panjdeh) incident almost brought Russia and Britain into war, but in the event wisdom on both sides prevailed. The Russians had reached the outer fringes of the mountain barrier south of Turkistan and had subdued their most doughty opponents, the Tekke Turkmens; the British were still able to support an Afghan kingdom behind the Hindu Kush and the Oxus, which should be free of Russian interference and so act as an effective buffer to their empire in India. A bargain between two equal sides was concluded by diplomacy, and the balance swung to rest."(60) After the ultimatums and sabre-rattling, Britain once again, as it had done earlier in the case of Iran and the Russian occupation of Khiva and Merv, quietly backed down and compromised on a diplomatic solution. London conveniently ignored its treaty obligations to Afghanistan and instead "recognised the Panjdeh Oasis as a Russian possession. In return, Russia agreed to hand over to Afghanistan the Zulfiqar region. The agreement was effected by a protocol signed in London on September 10, 1885."(61) Thus Afghanistan's border was once more trimmed to suit the compulsions of big power politics. Amir Abdur Rahman had already made a bitter forecast: "My country is like a poor goat on whom the lion and the bear have both fixed their eyes, and without the protection of the Almighty Deliverer, the victim cannot hope to escape very long."(62)

"TRUE" OXUS

By the mid-1870's Britain had to all intents succeeded in securing Afghanistan's border with Russia and converting that country into the glacis Lord Curzon had spoken of. Although Afghanistan's capability to act as a physical/military hindrance to Russia was entirely relative to the British willingness to confront the Tzarist menace, but its inter-position as a buffer which had St. Petersburg's approval was designed to deter the ambitions of Russian generals. In any case there was not much else left to occupy in Central Asia and the Tzarist officials were busy in Russianising the local population with considerable zeal supported by much ruthlessness. In the west, Iran's border with Russia had already been regulated, while in the east, the Himalayas acted like a shield against unlikely adventures from the weak Chinese empire.

With India's frontiers fully guaranteed against foreign threat with the help of geography and diplomacy, Britain looked forward to a long pleasant stay. Consequently British officials occupied themselves in consolidating the government's power and incorporating the rich territory into the British colonial system. An unending stream of British surveyors, geographers, spies, adventurers, carpetbaggers, and others of their ilk were swarming all over the border areas, particularly in the north, preparing maps, collecting intelligence and conducting ethnographic enquiries. There were still some extremely inaccessible areas which needed to be brought within the colonial fold. Some years earlier viceroy Lord Lytton had already enunciated the official policy for the northern frontier:

> "The natural boundary of India is formed by the convergence of the great mountain ranges of the Himalayas and of the Hindu Kush which extend here northwards upto their junction ... Within the angle thus formed lie the territories of Chitral, Darel, Yasin, Hunza and other petty dependencies ... And the only pass through these ranges from the Pamir are ... in the hands of small independent chiefs ... (and if we) ... consolidate our influence over this country ... we shall have laid down a natural line of frontier which is distinct, intelligible and likely to be respected."(63)

The passes Lytton was interested in securing were those which connected the tiny northern states with Wakhan — the south-western portion of the Pamirs which became a part of Afghanistan under the 1873 agreement. The intention was to close these gaps against any possible adventure by the Afghans or from the Russians from the west. The Wakhan in the east joined the Chinese Sinkiang (Xinjiang) territory somewhere in the formidable Pamirs. The actual cartography in these parts did not really matter, as most British officials believed that the Pamirs, where the greatest ranges of Asia met, were a wild tangle of wholly inaccessible mountains entirely unfit for transit by man or beast. Initially, the Pamirs — which the Arabs designated as the 'roof of the World' or *Bam-i-Duniya* in Persian — were thought to be a plateau, an almost flat tableland. Later enquiries revealed that the Pamirs in fact constituted eight valleys, with lakes and rivers. Central Asia's two major rivers — the Sir and Amu rise from this immense mountainous region which also contains some of the world's greatest glaciers.

It was therefore, not without some amount of surprise that a British survey team led by Lt. Colonel Gordon while secretly tramping in the difficult region in 1873-74 made some "devastating" discoveries. One was that "Rawlinson's line for the Afghan frontier on the Pamirs, which the Russians had just accepted as a limit of their sphere of influence, was a nonsense ... Rawlinson's red pencil had followed the line of what was thought to be the Oxus. Now it was discovered that all the Afghan dependencies in the region sprawled on both sides of this river. Not only, therefore, was the agreement worthless as a limitation but, in so far as the Afghans would soon choose to assert their influence beyond the river, extremely dangerous ... The true Oxus, they decided, flowed not west from the Great Pamir but east from the Little Pamir. Otherwise known as the Aksu, Murghab or Bartang,

this river pursued its course hundreds of miles to the north of Rawlinson's Oxus and, this being the case, made a literal interpretation of the 1873 agreement meaningless."(64) The other discovery was that "strategically the Pamirs were no barrier at all. A column of Russian artillery advancing from Khokand could reach Wakhan and the north face of the Hindu Kush considerably quicker than a British one sent up from the Punjab could reach the southern face in Yasin or Hunza — if it could get there at all."(65)

GAP IN THE RAMPARTS

Lord Lytton's enunciation was apparently aimed at sealing off the passes that pierced the Hindu Kush and opened a door in the north. The threat from China at that time was not pronounced as Kashgar, southern part of eastern Turkestan, now known as Xinjiang, had overthrown Chinese rule and become independent by 1865. It was ruled by Yaqub Beg, whose friendship was successfully cultivated by the British, who "relying on the apparent stability of Yakub's rule, saw the advantages of making Kashgar a buffer state between all three Empires."(66) At that time Russia was still far away to the west, with the Kokand state intervening. By the beginning of the 1870's British officials, agents and surveyors started visiting Kashgar and environs. This included the northern Pamirs areas which were conterminous to the eastern limits of Russian territory. Besides, a profitable trade also developed between India and Kashgar, and Britain helped to forge a relationship between Kashgar and Turkey. All this did not go unnoticed by the Russian authorities in the west, specially the governor general of Turkestan, General von Kauffmann, who feared that Britain might encourage Yaqub Beg to capture Ili valley, a mineral rich and fertile area, adjacent to the Russian sphere. Benefiting from an uprising in Ili, the Russians occupied the valley in 1870 with an assurance that it will be returned to China when that empire was able to exercise its authority. Six years later, the Russians annexed Kokand and in the process moved southwards till they reached the eastern Pamirs, an area adjoining Kashgar, Afghanistan and the northern states.

A few years later, Britain's move to prop up Kashgar as a buffer in the east between India and Russia, came to an unhappy end when China asserted its authority over the area and reoccupied Kashgar in 1878 again extending its border to India. The upshot of the brief Kashgar enterprise was that the Tzarist forces had become a reality in the Pamirs with a resulting flurry of activity in India, largely in the north where efforts were being made to secure the passes. Britain, however, enjoyed a brief respite in its tussle with St. Petersburg, when relations between Russia and China reached an unprecedented low, with the threat of a war looming in the future. There was no war and Sino-Russian ties improved after the St. Petersburg treaty was signed in 1881. Consequently, Russia sought and received trade benefits in Kashgar, where a Russian consul general was appointed in 1882. What made matters worse for Britain was the Chinese refusal to allow a British consul in Kashgar or encourage Indian trade with that province.

Thus by the time Britain had succeeded in settling the contentious Afghan border issue with Russia in the west in 1885, it was threatened by the spectre of Tzarist cossacks thundering across the Pamirs into

the northern reaches of the rich Indian colony. The situation was made precarious by the fact that, unlike in the northwest where Afghanistan would prove an almost impossible hurdle for the Russians, there was nothing in the north to stop them, not even the immense Hindu Kush, which was already being traversed by cossacks on a frequent junket into the Pamirs. The Gordon mission had reported that the Pamir "passes were low and easy, the grazing was some of the richest in the world and the open valleys were well stocked with the herds and flocks of the nomadic Kirghiz. From Osh in Khokand to Sarhad in Wakhan only thirty miles of road needed attention."(67) The whole defensive structure that was constructed by the British strategists with the difficult Pamirs and the equally inaccessible Hindu Kush range to the south to act as a wall against the Russians was now in ruins. Till then the ownership of the Pamirs and the Hindu Kush was of little consequence for the British as the whole wild jumble of snow-bound peaks, difficult ranges and arid steppes had appeared an insurmountable barrier.

Moreover, Gordon mission's enquiries about the passes through the Hindu Kush were far from reassuring. The Killik pass over to Hunza was "remarkably easy" and "open all the year round". Then there were the "Baroghil pass into Chitral and the Darkot to Yasin, the former gentle enough for field artillery of sorts to have crossed it in recent times". And finally there was the Ishkoman pass and road that led to Gilgit, Chilas and on down the Indus.(68) As a result of these enquiries, the British were faced not only with the problem of the ill-defined limit of Afghan territory but also a gap in the 'ramparts' as broad as the Pamirs which had no known claimant. The Russians had already started a detailed study of the Pamirs and surveyors and explorers were roaming all over those areas which Britain was trying to bring under its control.

Some of the Russian explorers, who had visited the Pamirs in the beginning of the 1880's had already commented on the question of the ownership of the Pamirs. Colonel Kostenko and Dr.Regel were two of the Russian visitors who had led separate missions of enquiry to the eastern and western Pamirs, and the former in his report had even pointed out that Pamir was a no-man's land and hence ripe for taking.(69) At the time when Kostenko's views were published, a British official in India, Ney Elias, pointed out in a memorandum that all the territory south and east of the Chinese district of Sarikol as well as Badakshan, Shugnan and Wakhan were entirely open to the Russians "if it suited their convenience or ambition ... and the time when the British red line and the Russian green one shall meet on the map of Central Asia seems within measurable distance."(70) This dissertation merely articulated what was already troubling the British authorities in India, particularly because the Russo-Afghan boundary demarcation work which had started in the west was slowly inching its way to the Pamirs in the east. The Afghan border in the Pamirs, which was defined by the 1873 agreement, was now found to be all wrong, besides there was a gap in the eastern Pamirs where in all likelihood the Russian and Indian borders would meet. This was a possibility least liked by the British rulers in India, whose entire concept of the "defence" of India rested on the theory of having buffer states between the territories of the two powers.

FORWARD AGAIN

It was at this stage that the first important development took place in an arena which hitherto was confined to cartographical one-

upmanship based on the favourable "discoveries" by itinerant explorers of both sides. In 1883, Afghan forces moved into Shugnan and Roshan, the two states north of Wakhan in the western Pamirs. The spur for the Afghan action was an insurrection in Shugnan against Amir Abdur Rahman in 1882, reportedly staged by Dr. Regel, a Russian explorer who was visiting the state at that time. Regel had claimed that Shugnan was a tributary of Kokand and as such came under Russian control. The Afghan action appeared to be contrary to the 1873 agreement which had laid down that all areas on the south and west or the left bank of the Oxus were Afghan territory and those on the north and east or the right bank fell under Russian influence. Badakhshan and its dependent district of Wakhan, both on left bank of the Oxus were conceded to Afghanistan, but Shugnan and Roshan which were on the right bank came under the Russian control. While the agreement made a cavalier distribution of the areas, it ignored the fact that both the states straddled the Oxus, thus making a correct interpretation of the agreement almost impossible. Charles Black, who was in charge of geographical business of the India Office of the British government, and who also edited J. Popowski's book "*The Rival Powers in Central Asia*" explaining the anomaly in the 1873 agreement says in a footnote in the book on page 53:

> The actual words of the agreement are: "Badakhshan with its dependent district Wakhan from Sarikol on the east to the junction of the Kokcha river with the Oxus (or Penjah) *on the west; the stream of the Oxus* thus forming the northern boundary of this Afghan province throughout its entire extent." But, unfortunately, owing to the copyist's error, the words in italics were omitted in the final agreement (England and Russia in the East, p.310). - Ed.

Although Black's explanation appears feasible, but it is possible that the British officials who were negotiating with the Russians about Afghanistan's territorial limits, were unsure of the extent of Afghan territory and thus preferred to maintain a certain unpreciseness in the wording of the agreement to allow for future adjustments, rather than to be exact and tie down the treaty to defined terminology. At the time the agreement was being discussed, Amir Sher Ali Khan had claimed Shugnan and Roshan as being a part of his territory, while the Russians not only rejected these claims, but speaking for the Amir of Bokhara, whose state bordered Afghanistan, laid claim to Badakhshan and Wakhan and other cis-Oxus areas of Afghanistan. The agreement probably was arrived at after a certain amount of horse trading, in which the British on behalf of Afghanistan agreed to forego Shugnan and Roshan in exchange for Bokhara's withdrawal from areas on the left bank of the Oxus.

Afghanistan, however, never fully renounced its claims to the trans-Oxus areas of Shugnan and Roshan. Amir Abdur Rahman gave historical evidence to prove Afghanistan's right to the area, and in his biography gives a detailed explanation for his action of 1883:

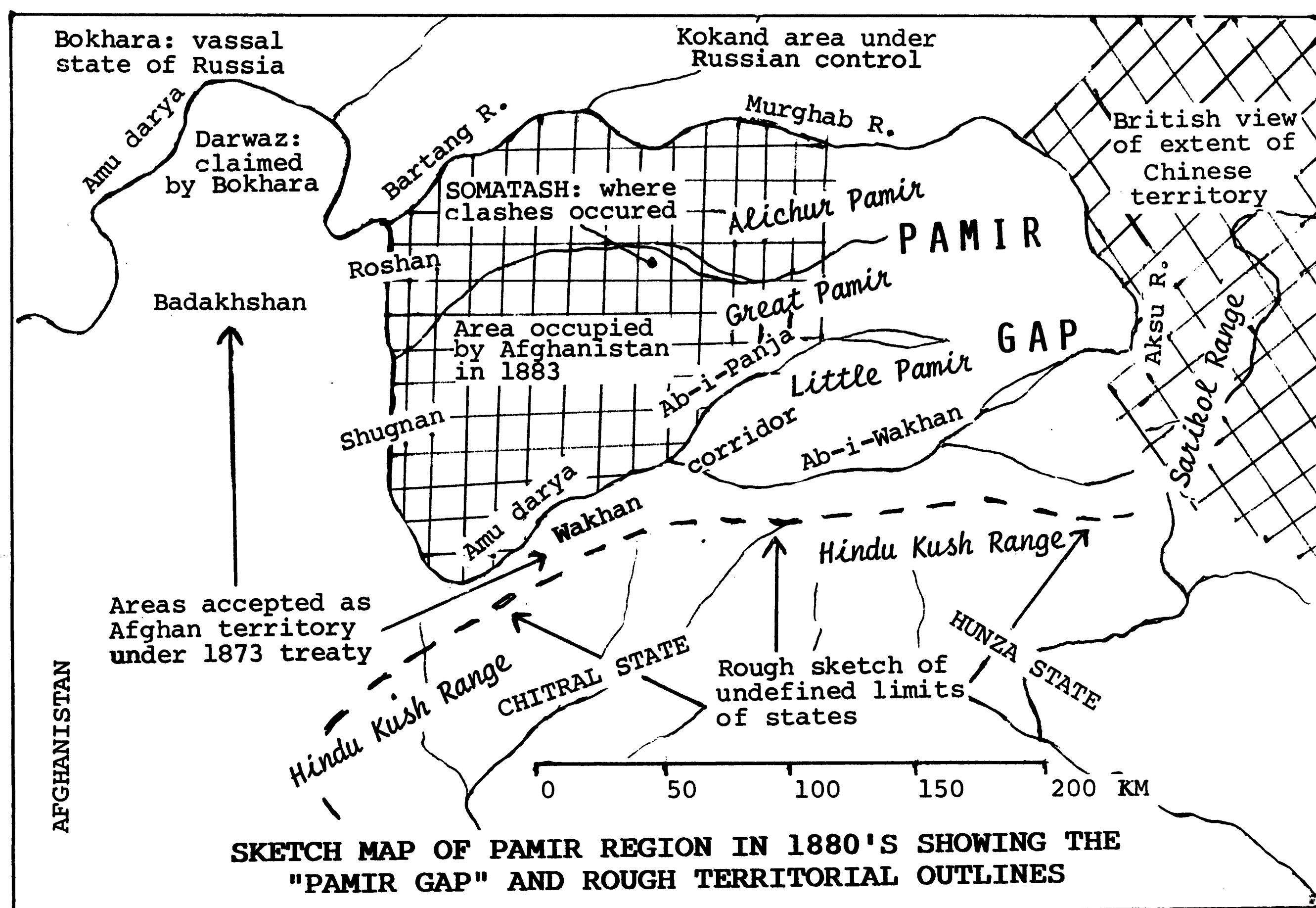
> "And though according to the Treaty of 1873 the Russians had agreed that Badakhshan and Wakhan should be included in Afghanistan, and Roshan

> and Shugnan formed a part of Badakhshan, yet as Roshan and Shugnan command the roads from Russia towards India, the Russians were planning to take possession of them. But I had foreseen their policy, and had appointed my governors to occupy these countries before the Russians could enter them. I had a double right (1) because they were included within my dominions according to the above mentioned Treaty of 1873, and (2) because the King of Bokhara had occupied one portion of Darwaz towards the left bank of the Oxus, which justified me in taking possession of those parts of Shugnan which lie on the right bank of the stream..."(71)

Another possible reason for the Afghan action might be the "discovery" of the "true" Oxus by the Gordon mission in 1874 which suggested that the Oxus identified by Rawlinson in 1873 treaty was wrong. The new Oxus line made Shugnan and Roshan cis-Oxus states and consequently a part of Afghanistan. Although it appears the initiative to occupy the two states was the Amir's — Devendra Kaushik says it was done under pressure from the British government(72) —, it partially solved the problem of the Pamir gap. The Afghan occupation greatly annoyed the Russians who protested to the British authorities. The subsequent exchange of notes temporarily abated with Britain upholding the Afghan claim on the basis of the 1873 agreement, and the Russians being too occupied elsewhere to further pursue the matter.(73)

Ney Elias, the British official mentioned earlier, who had an interesting record of tramping in many parts of Asia on exploratory trips, was deputed by the government to undertake yet another excursion into the Pamirs to determine the exact course of the Oxus, and its main tributary, find the easternmost limits of the Afghan states of Shugnan and Roshan, and the westernmost extent of the Chinese border. He started on his trek in late 1885 and completed it in the beginning of 1886 by traversing the Pamirs from east to west, which included long detours to study the passes connecting the Pamirs — a formidable achievement seeing that it was winter and the area is difficult at the best of times.

His findings proved to be of immense importance and though not put to immediate use, they formed the basis of British policy on the Pamirs in the 1890's. Elias, an accomplished hydrographer, found that the river shown in the 1873 agreement as the Oxus was correct, thus upholding the cartography of the accord. But at the same time the discovery put into doubt the Afghan occupation of Shugnan and Roshan which would now once again become trans-Oxus areas. Furthermore, relying on the testimony of the ubiquitous Kirghiz nomads, he found the Shugnan state extended to Alichur Pamir in the northeast. These hardy inhabitants of the arid wastes voiced allegiance to Shugnan and thus to Badakhshan and on to Afghanistan. He also discovered a gap between the westernmost extent of the Chinese territory and the eastern limit of Shugnan, which reached down to the north face of the Hindu Kush, touching the Hunza state.



SKETCH MAP OF PAMIR REGION IN 1880'S SHOWING THE "PAMIR GAP" AND ROUGH TERRITORIAL OUTLINES

ELASTIC BORDERS

Elias' most important recommendation was that the Afghan border could be stretched eastward till it reached the Chinese border, thus creating a neutral buffer belt right across the Pamirs and insulating the northern states south of Hindu Kush from the Russian territory.(74) Elias' findings only confirmed the worst fears of the British that they were very poorly placed in the Pamirs. A large tract of land in the area to which none of the Pamir powers — Britain, Afghanistan, Russia and China — had made claims could easily be occupied by the Russians thus giving them a frontage on the Hindu Kush. Afghan occupation of Shugnan and Roshan states had the potential for much controversy, largely to the discomfiture of Britain, which had recently upheld Amir Abdur Rahman's claim to the states. The situation was compounded by the fact that the string of tiny, but by no means docile states in the angle formed by the Hindu Kush and Himalayas — Chitral, Yasin, Hunza, Nagar and others — were still out of British control. The nearest point where British authority reached was in the native state of Jammu and Kashmir, many valleys away from the volatile angle in the north. Besides the terrain of the area made a large scale expedition not only difficult but time consuming.

All these factors made the probability of a British military response to Russian advance in the Pamirs remote, leaving only two other options open: diplomacy and pressure on Russia elsewhere in the

world. By the beginning of the 1890's when the Anglo-Russian rivalry shifted eastwards, as was feared, the "Tzarist government claimed rights over the Eastern Pamirs as successors to the Kokand Khanate. So far as the bekdoms in the Western Pamirs were concerned the 1873 agreement with Britain had left them to the Russian sphere of influence, situated as they were north of the Amu Darya."(75)

The British response to the Russian position was to initially encourage Afghan and Chinese claims to bits and pieces of the Pamirs. "... Great Britain as representing Afghanistan, and Russia were not the only powers concerned since China, who had held the Sarikol Valley to the east with a garrison at Tashkargan, also laid shadowy claims to portions of the Pamirs. Finally it was most desirable in the interests alike of Afghanistan and the Indian Empire not to leave any gap between the possessions of China and those of Afghanistan."(76) The other action taken by the British government in India was to extend its authority to the realms of the northern states — which were lumped together wrongly under the general term of "Dardistan." Of these states, the most important one was Hunza, the limits of whose undefined dominion stretched into Sinkiang in the east and Wakhan in the north. Hunza was also the most fiercely independent of the lot and maintained a surprisingly successful policy of balancing the Russians, Chinese and British against each other. On occasion, the Maharaja of Kashmir claimed suzerainty over Hunza, a fact accepted by the British but almost non-existent in practice. Moreover, it was also known that the Mir of Hunza sent an annual tribute to Sinkiang thus signifying the acceptance of Chinese suzerainty.

Kashmir's claim to most of the "Dardistan" states devolved on occasional forays by Dogra troops who indulged in unprecedented rapine, massacre and looting. A British explorer touring one of the states months after an action by the Kashmir state forces saw deserted and burned down villages and the ground littered with the skeletons of men, women and children. Nevertheless, Kashmir's unsure claim was the only practical solution available left to the British authorities who proceeded to encourage the Kashmir ruler to advance his rule over the states. Earlier efforts by British officials and "explorers" to penetrate the area were largely unsuccessful one of whom was murdered — although it was widely believed that the killing was connived at by the Kashmir maharaja who was averse to snooping Britons reporting on the ruthlessness of the Kashmir rule.

MINOR IMPERIALISM

Although British officials eventually succeeded in opening a dialogue with the Mir of Hunza, but they found him unwilling to accept any British projection in the area. But what irked the British most was the increasing rapport that was developing not only between the Hunzas and Chinese but also between the Hunzas and Russians. The worst blow of this kind was felt in 1889 when a "Russian political officer with a Cossack escort entered Hunza. Dardistan did not exactly explode but the welcome accorded this Captain Grombtchevski was in marked contrast to the treatemnt meted out to Biddulph and Lockhart (two British officals). Offers of money and arms appear to have been accepted. In return, the new Mir of Hunza, Safdar Ali, son and murderer of Ghazan Khan, gave permission for a Russian post to be set up on his territory and agreed to seek Russian aid in repelling any further aggression from Gilgit."(77)

The same year, to keep matters even, the Hunza Mir allowed the new agent in Gilgit, Col. Algernon Durand, to visit the state. An agreement was reached, according to which Hunza would cease all raids into the neighbouring Chinese territory in lieu of a handsome subsidy by the British. The Mir also acknowledged the suzerainty of Great Britain and agreed to extend communication facilities to British officials travelling in Sinkiang.(78) However, the agreement did not quite convert Hunza into the kind of tame state the British were expecting, and it was not long before a catalogue of charges was prepared against the Mir. He had refused to allow easy passage through his state to British couriers, continued to receive Russian visitors and did not stop the raids. The list was endless.

With fear mounting that the Hunza passes opening on to Wakhan and Sinkiang offered an easy breach in the Indian defence to Russia (a fact which was never proved) the British power finally veered round to the idea of bringing not only Hunza but a few other "troublesome" states under its firm control. The maharaja of Kashmir was "once again asked to exercise rigid control over his feudatories and a joint Indo-Kashmir Mission was established to implement this decision."(79) The Gilgit agency which had been reactivated recently after being in abeyance for years, witnessed a build up of forces. The British, however, were faced by two major hurdles: One was the highly inaccessible location of Baltit, the state's capital, and the other, the fact that Hunza was a self-declared tributary of China. Chinese officials watching the situation from Sinkiang, just across the eastern border would hardly have liked the British invading a state which they considered a dependency. As Britain was then seeking Chinese co-operation in plugging the Pamir gap, it was not in a position to annoy that power. Consequently, to mollify the Chinese, it was decided to offer to them the other side of the northern passes of the Pamirs.(80)

Thus, under the facade of reimposing the suzerainty of the Kashmir maharaja, a large mixed force but mostly comprising British Indian troops, invaded the state in 1891, and after facing particularly tough resistance from the Hunzakuts, succeeded in occupying Baltit the capital. Mir Safdar Ali escaped to Sinkiang and another claimant was installed in the rulership. The British made much of the victory as they needed something of this sort to build up their image in Hindu Kush where the Tzarist cossacks were having a field day galloping all over the Pamir with gay abandon. But in achieving the victory even of this small size, one abiding truth was brought home to them, that they were in no position to sustain the defence of India in the insurmountable Hindu Kush range. It had taken months to build the Hunza force in Gilgit, the advance was deterred by lack of roads and the nature of terrain, and the actual fighting was difficult although the Hunzakuts were largely armed with muskets and archaic canons. Another result of the British "conquest" was that it speeded Russian advance on the Pamirs.

Earlier, in pursuit of the diplomatic policy of getting the Afghans and Chinese to extend their borders to a point of contact on the Pamirs to create a protective buffer shield across the north of Dardistan, the British government in India sent another mission led by Captain (later Sir Francis) Younghusband to Sinkiang. With a slight amendment to Elias' suggestion for extending the Afghan border eastward till it reached the Chinese frontier, the British decided to encourage the Chinese to advance their outposts westwards on the Pamirs, as "it was rightly felt that for political reasons the Russians were more likely to respect Peking's sovereignty than they were Kabul's."(81) Younghus-

band's brief was clear: He was to first decide where the Afghan and Chinese borders were to meet on the Pamirs, and next to urge the Chinese authorities at Sinkiang to move their border westwards to the Afghan frontier.

Younghusband's search for a meeting point of the proposed international border naturally took him to Alichur Pamir, which Elias had already decided was Afghan territory by virtue of being a part of Shugnan. Here it was "discovered" that the "Alichur Pamir had been the somewhat disputed boundary between the Afghans and the Chinese long before the appearance of Russia on the scene. Indeed there was a stone inscribed with trilingual record in Chinese, Manchus and Turki languages, on the shore of the Yashil Kul or the "Green Lake", which commemorated a victory of a Chinese general over Kalmuck chiefs in 1759. The place was thence forward named Somatash or 'the Inscribed Stone'."(82)

In course of time, Somatsh became an important landmark for the British in their effort to co-ordinate the limits of the Afghan and Chinese territories. Younghusband accordingly decided that there was historic evidence sufficient enough to warrant the advance of the Chinese border to Somatsh. In doing so, the British official overlooked the fact that Elias had already decided that Somatash was well within Afghan territory, as the border of Shugnan stretched to the Aksu river, about one hundred miles eastward.(83) Younghusband was successful in getting the Chinese to stake a claim on the Pamirs up to Somatsh, but a Chinese general along with a complement of troops who duly proceeded to the spot was expelled by the Russians, who were already in the area.

RUSSIAN CLAIMS

Britain's surreptitious moves in the Pamirs from the beginning of the 1890's had not gone unobserved by the Tzarist government. "In the summer of 1891 Colonel Yonoff (also Ianov, Yonov, Ionov and Yanoff according to other writers) with a squadron of cossacks was despatched from Osh to the Pamir, nominally "to shoot the Ovis Poli and to practice rifle shooting!" In reality Yonoff mission was to expel any Chinese or Afghan detachments from the area and anticipate by these forcible measures, the proposed diplomatic settlement with Great Britain."(84) The cossacks easily swept across the Pamirs, crossed the "impassable" Hindu Kush range into the Ishkoman valley of Yasin, and passing along the watershed, crossed the Darkot and Baroghil passes back to Wakhan. This ominous ride by the cossacks made shambles of the cherished idea of Britain to use geography to keep away Russia from India. What was even more disconcerting was that "the country was by nature difficult of access to the British but relatively easy for Russian parties."(85)

Meanwhile, Younghusband who was still in the Pamirs investigating reports of a large body of Russian troops, met the detachment of cossacks at Bozai Gumbaz led by the same Col. Yonoff. The Russian officer not only confirmed the cossacks' forays across the Hindu Kush into Yasin and Chitral, but revealed that Russia had annexed the whole of the Pamirs, excluding the inhabited parts of Wakhan, as a result the Russians "had a frontage on the Hindu Kush fifty miles long and direct access to nearly all the passes into Yasin and Hunza."(86) To add insult to the shock of Younghusband, he was "compelled by the Russian officer to sign a document by which he undertook not to cross certain passes leading into the

territory now claimed to belong to the Tzar."(87) The insult was completed when Younghusband was "expelled" from the Pamirs. Another British officer, Lt. Davison (also Davidson) who had been despatched to Somatash by Younghusband to observe the Chinese occupation of the post, was "practically arrested" by Yonoff and later expelled from the Pamirs. The Russian position was that Bozai Gumbaz was not Afghan territory and that the British officials had no right to be there. "The (British) Indian government first contested this, then conceded it, while Younghusband tried to argue that if it was'nt Afghan then it must be Chinese; what else could it be in view of his having established that the two frontiers met further north at Somatash."(88)

The incident created a major furore between Britain and Russia, but remained largely at the diplomatic level as the "problem for Britain and India was how to counteract these Russian moves without sending a force across the Hindu Kush."(89) St. Petersburg eventually expressed regret over the matter and withdrew Yonoff's claim to the Pamirs, but did not disclaim Russian rights to the area. Popowski says "Indeed it is alleged that while the Tzar rebuked Colonel Yonoff and desired him to abstain from crossing the Karakoram and Muztagh ranges in his future reconnaissances, he also promoted him and presented him with a valuable ring set with the Imperial monogram to console him for the reproof which international etiquette had necessitated."(90)

In 1892, the Chinese apparently still relying on British advice to stake a claim in the Pamirs, once again appeared at Somatash after the Russians had departed, only to find the place in Afghan hands. This confusion resulted from Younghusband's action in handing over the eastern Pamirs up to Somatash to Chinese, while Elias a few years earlier had declared the same chunk of territory stretching to Aksu river in the east to be Afghan and recommended the placing of Afghan forces in the area. A clash resulted and the Afghans succeeded in expelling the Chinese from the area. The Chinese having been worsted for a second time at Somatash withdrew from the Pamir in high dudgeon and refused to co-operate further with the British in closing the gap.

Due to a change of policy in St. Petersburg, the cossacks led by Colonel Yonoff once again reappeared on the Pamirs a few months later in 1892 and finding the Afghans at Somatash demanded their withdrawal. Upon the refusal of the Afghans, a bloody clashed took place in which the outnumbered Afghans, fought to the end and consequently all but one were killed. The Russians thus succeeded in eliminating the last of the rivals for the Pamirs. For good measure, they removed the inscribed stone from Somatash, moved southwards and destroyed a Chinese fort and thence demonstrated in three places — in the Alichur valley "so as to overawe Shugnan, at Langar Kisht, by the foot of the Hindu Kush range, and near Tashkurghan and the Taghdumbash Pamir in the east."(91) Detachments of Russian troops were left at various places in the Pamirs where they remained throughout the 1892-93 winter.

The Afghan Amir, who had acted on British recommendations and placed his forces at Somatash, was bitter about the incident, while Britain once again failed to stand by its treaty obligations to the Afghans. In any case there was very little that Britain could do in bolstering Afghan claims in the Pamirs, as they faced an almost impossible task in sending forces to the Pamirs to counter the Russians

who were well situated in Kokand. The situation was militarily difficult for Britain, and the only way out was through negotiations so as to salvage as much of their buffer scheme as they could. But this too was made more difficult due to subsequent developments.

The Chinese had already quit the Pamirs after the second Somatash debacle, while the Afghan Amir was "having serious doubts about defending such an unremunerative chunk of tundra" and was all for withdrawing from the area. The Amir put this threat into effect when he withdrew his occupation from the north and eastwards of Murghab river and confined himself to west of 73°E longtitude.(92) This created a new difficulty for the British as the Amir "while retaining territory on the wrong side of the Oxus in the north, he had renounced parts of Wakhan to which he was entitled by the 1873 line, and by doing so had laid bare the Dora (Do Rahah) Group of passes into Chitral west of Baroghil, which so far the Russians had been unable to approach."(93)

NEGOTIATIONS

After having achieved with some degree of success the plan to create a string of buffer states stretching from Iran in the west to Sinkiang in the east of Pamirs, the British were now hamstrung in a tiny portion in the Hindu Kush where they had run out of options and malleable allies. The Pamir gap, which Elias and Younghusband had tried to stuff with extensions of Afghan and Chinese territory was still open, while the mountainous Pamirs and the impassable Hindu Kush had failed to be of any use, and there was little else for Britain to go by except negotiations, which the Russians also favoured.

The negotiations with the Russians were long and complicated. The British were determined to extend the Afghan frontier or whatever was left of it, as far north and east as possible to give some depth to the buffer, while the Russians favoured a line further south, in fact along the same alignment as in the 1873 treaty. This necessitated a trip to Kabul by Sir Mortimer Durand in 1893 to meet the Amir and sell the idea of the new Afghan frontier in the Pamirs. The Amir agreed to withdraw his occupation from the trans-Oxus regions (Shugnan and Roshan) in return for areas under the control of Bokhara state (as such Russia) in Afghanistan's cis-Oxus region. This was the territory of Darwaz in the loop made by the Oxus. The Amir, however, was reluctant to play the role of a defender of British imperial interests in the Hindu Kush and desired to quit Wakhan altogether. "In 1893 I told Sir M. Durand that I could not protect Wakhan against Russian aggression if the English intended cutting away Chitral and Bajaur from me: I accordingly left Wakhan to the responsibility and protection of the English" states Amir Abdur Rahman in his biography.(94) Percy Sykes referring to the refusal of the Amir to hold Wakhan quotes Durand: "He (the Amir) says he had a hand cut off at "Somatash the other day and he is not going to stretch a long arm along the Hindu Kush to have that shorn off also".(95) Eventually the Amir "agreed though with reluctance to assume control of the inhospitable valley of Wakhan in the north-east corner of his dominion. The Government of India paid him half a lakh of rupees (£ 5,000) a year to meet the cost of administration. It was from their point of view a moderate price to pay to secure that north-eastern end of the Hindu Kush against Russian penetration."(96)

SETTLEMENT

In the final settlement, Russia succeeded in getting most of the Pamirs while Afghanistan and China shared a small strip running along the north face of the Hindu Kush. The agreement reached between Britain and Russia on March 11, 1895 laid down that the sphere of influence of the two powers to the east of Sir-i-Kul (or Lake Victoria) shall be divided by a line which, starting from a point on the lake near to its eastern extremity, shall follow the crest of the mountain range running somewhat to the south of the latitude of the lake as far as the Bendersky and Orta Bel passes. From there the line shall run along the same range, keeping south of the lake, descending to spur of the range towards Kizil Rabat on the Aksu River.(97) This line of influence of the two powers marked the border of Wakhan east of Sir-i-Kul lake. Westwards of the lake, the line was already marked out in the 1873 agreement.

Under the agreement, Britain and Russia engaged to abstain from exercising any political influence or control, the former to the north, the latter to the south, of the line of demarcation. Britain also agreed that it shall not annex the Afghan territory in the Pamirs nor establish military posts or forts.(98)

The southern boundary of the Wakhan strip with India (at that time the states of Hunza, Yasin and Chitral) formed a part of what is known as the Durand Line. It was settled during the visit of Sir Mortimer Durand to Kabul (mentioned earlier) for talks with the Amir and the signing of the agreement of November 12, 1893. Thus the Wakhan salient comprised the original Wakhan district of Afghanistan, bounded by Chitral and Yasin states in the south and a further strip along the north face of the Hindu Kush — bridging the famous Pamir Gap — reaching to the Sinkiang border.

Although Amir Abdur Rahman added the Wakhan salient to his dominion, he states in his biography that "The province of Wakhan, which had come under my dominion, I arranged to be left under the British for protection, as it was too far from Kabul, and cut off from the rest of my country, and therefore very difficult to be properly fortified."(99) It is not clear what was the British position on this arrangement as in the treaty Britain agreed that it would not annex the Afghan territory, nor have military posts in the area. It is possible, that as the Amir realised the difficulty of defending the area, he wisely left it to the British to look after its security. If this was the case, then it placed Britain in the same predicament it faced before the accord, that of not having a neutral insulation between the farthest limits of the two powers.

The Wakhan settlement clearly revealed that far from being a consensus of all the Pamir powers involved, it was mainly an agreement between Britain and Russia. "The Afghans were mere spectators, while the government of the Chinese empire refused to take part in the boundary demarcations in 1895."(100) The demarcation line in the eastern Pamirs was, therefore, arbitrary and imposed on the Chinese, although only a few years earlier Britain was loudly proclaiming Chinese rights in the Pamirs. The only concession made to Chinese claim after the line was drawn was the instruction in the agreement to the proposed joint border demarcation commission "to report any facts which can be ascertained on the spot bearing on the situation of the Chinese frontier, with a view

to enable the two Governments to come to an agreement with the Chinese Government as to the limits of Chinese territory in the vicinity of the line, in such manner as may be found most convenient."(101)

Two years after the agreement was signed, the Anglo-Russian Pamir boundary commission was able to declare somewhat rhetorically about the place where the line reached the supposed Chinese border:

> "Here, amidst a solitary wilderness 20,000 feet above sea level, absolutely inaccessible to man and within the ken of no living creatures except the Pamir eagles, the three great Empires actually meet. No more fitting trijunction could possibly be found."(102)

The claim that three great Empires "actually met" was in due course contested, and it was left to Fraser-Tytler to clear the confusion. He suggested that as the Pamir line stopped on a ridge of the Sarikol range, and 23 miles south was Mintaka Pass from where the Durand Line started, and the nearest Chinese post being at Bayik, about fifteen miles from the terminals of the two lines, the traingle thus formed became a highly inaccessible non-man's land. It was in this triangle that the three empires met.(103) This space was later filled by the Chinese.

The Chinese government, however, never accepted the Pamir boundary settlement, and reverberations of Chinese protests continued to be heard, the most recent one being in July 1981, when it accused Soviet Union of concluding a border treaty with a third country (i.e. Afghanistan) involving a territory which was not the legal territory of Soviet Union.(104) The Chinese claim will be discussed further on.

Although Britain succeeded in getting what she wanted all along — a barrier to maintain the quarantine of India — it was not the insurmountable wall and moat that was desired. It was a wafer thin buffer in a mountainous area which had dubious qualities of keeping back an invader from the north. Colonel Sir Thomas Holdich, who was a member of the Pamir boundary commission was unimpressed by the promontory as a physical hindrance to Russia. He called it "a political intervention — a hedge, as it were — over which Russia cannot step without violating Afghanistan and the violation of Afghanistan may (or may not) be regarded as a *casus belli*."(105) Holdich probably saw it as a trip wire, delaying the Russians long enough to give the British a chance to ring the political alarm bells. There was little else that Britain could do in the area in the nature of a military action. In fact Britain's policy in dealing with the Russians on issues involving Tzarist advance in Central Asia had been one of negotiations directly between London and St. Petersburg, and extreme caution, even appeasement at times, in the field.

Sir Olaf Caroe goes even further in describing it as "a cartographical buffer — it is little else — between the limits of British expansion in Gilgit and Chitral and the Russian expansion on the Pamirs."(106) In fact, Wakhan was one place where the traditional British buffer doctrine became a formal farce. According to Rizvi "British imperial frontier policy along the Himalayas (it was a frontier much more than a boundary policy) actually seemed to aim at exercising control over the 'reverse slopes' facing away from the main power

centres."(107) In this case there was little more than a thin ledge to enable Britain to exercise control over the 'reverse slopes'. Moreover, the Afghan Amir was never really interested in looking after the defence of Wakhan, and had most probably little more than a formal presence in the strip. It thus remained Britain's responsibility to continue to safeguard the passes through the Hindu Kush.

The saving grace of the Wakhan salient, however, lies in the fact that it has geographical credibility. According to A. Tayyab "The Wakhan ridge is also a definite water divide between the drainage systems of the Indus and the Amu Darya. This ridge clearly separates the arid, semi-arid, landlocked, continental plains and plateaux of Central Asia from the alluvial plains of Indus (which drains into the Arabian Sea) whose climate is influenced by marine winds from the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea."(108)

INDIAN MOVE

Half a century after the creation of the Wakhan buffer, when it had become more or less an accepted fact of the map, it was once again thrust into the limelight, but in a dimension different from what it was originally intended as. With British India having been divided on a demographic basis between Muslim Pakistan and Hindu India in August 1947, the Kashmir question loomed large with the maharaja of the strategic state yet undecided on the matter of accession. As a civil war flared up in the state, the maharaja "acceded" to India, and a day later on October 25, 1947, Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru declared "Kashmir's northern frontiers, as you are aware, run in common with those of three countries: Afghanistan, the USSR and the China ... Helping Kashmir is therefore, an obligation of national interest to India."(109) This studied declaration by Nehru on the geopolitical importance of Kashmir at a time when the legality or otherwise of the state's "accession" to India was yet in doubt, represents the initial stirrings of India to fill the one-time British role as a Central Asian power. But in this case Wakhan was no more seen as a limit to the sphere of influence, but as a stepping stone to the USSR. A month later Nehru again repeated the theme. "We were, of course vitally interested in the decision the State would take. Kashmir, because of her geographical position, with her frontiers marching with three countries, namely, the Soviet Union, China and Afghanistan, is intimately connected with the security and *international contacts of India*"."(110)

Later, during the Security Council debate on the Kashmir dispute in 1948-49, the Indian delegate, Gopalaswami Ayyangar had argued that "Kashmir, because of its geographical position, with its frontiers contiguous with those of countries like the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and China, is of vital importance to the security and international contacts of India. Economically also, Kashmir is intimately associated with India. The caravan trade routes from Central Asia to India pass through the Kashmir State."(111) India was not alone in seeking to open a bridge to Russia through Kashmir and Wakhan. The British viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, who subsequently became India's first governor-general, probably had already foreseen the need for handing over to India, Britain's responsibility as the defender of South Asia's continental ramparts in the north against Soviet Russian. He had made his little contribution, in this case by influencing the maharaja's decision in acceding to India. Although Mountbatten later

repeatedly denied having played a partisan role, some of his actions in those crucial days, before and after accession, suggest otherwise.

According to Sisir Gupta "One of the significant steps the British Government took in relation to Kashmir before transferring power to India was to restore the Gilgit area, hitherto administered by a British agency, to Kashmir, without any attempt to get the verdict of the local people. A separatist tradition had been fostered there for long, under the aegis of the Political Department which believed that a thorough British contool over this strategic area was absolutely essential in view of its proximity to the USSR."(112) There could be no doubt that this step was not taken without the direction of Mountbatten, who must have realised that the Gilgit Agency would have certainly gone to Pakistan if it was not added to Kashmir. This decision even shocked the Indian leader, Mahatma Gandhi, who when told of the jubilation on August 1, 1947 in Kashmir over the restoration of Gilgit called it "A great mistake. They should have taken this opportunity immediately to proclaim autonomy for Gilgit within Kashmir ...(He) saw the seeds of future trouble in an unqualified inclusion of Gilgit in Kashmir."(113) Restoring Gilgit to Kashmir meant ensuring an Indian link to Wakhan through an expected "accession" of Kashmir to India.

Mountbatten's other steps were to influence the maharaja into joining India as early as June 1947, at a time when there were reports that the Kashmir state might declare its independence after the lapse of British paramountcy.(114) Sisir Gupta, believes that Mountbatten's Kashmir visit was in context of the Congress leaders' appeal to His Majesty's Government to decide the States' issue. Mujtaba Rizvi deals with Mountbatten's role in considerable detail and shows, how in those days, under a outward cloak of rigid impartiality the last British regent had made timely moves to add Kashmir to India.(115)

While India inherited much of the British imperial frontier system along the borders with China, Nepal and Burma, and maintained a surprising adherence to a border policy which was wholly designed for colonial reasons, it lost in the north. The people of Gilgit agency rose in revolt, expelled the maharaja's forces and acceded to Pakistan.

CHINESE VIEW

When the Pamir boundary talks were underway between Britain and Russia, China declined to take part, although both London and St. Petersburg had gone through the formality of inviting Peking. When the border agreement was finally signed in 1895, China refused to accept the settlement. Nevertheless, Britain and Russia went ahead with the project and demarcated the border between Afghanistan and the territory under Russian control thus giving substance to the Wakhan buffer. Wakhan's border with British controlled territory in the south was delineated earlier in 1893. The two lines of the Afghan-Russian border and Afghan-Indian border thus terminated at points in the eastern Pamir, at what it was widely believed was the westernmost limit of Chinese Sinkiang province. The gap between the two terminals of the lines was 23 miles.

While Wakhan's border with Russia and British India were duly marked out on the ground, the Sino-Afghan border remained unmarked. A kind of a non-man's land thus existed between the two points, its

breadth uncertain. The boundary commission's report articulated the factual position with much eloquence that the boundary ended at "regions of perpetual ice and snow to its junction with the main (Sarikol) range". It was a nice way of concluding a task which was yet unfinished. The Chinese absence at the talks had forced the commission to leave its job with a sense of uncertainty still pervading.

By 1950, a year after the revolution in China, the non-man's land at the eastern end of Wakhan appears to have been filled by the Chinese government. Two American travellers, Mr. and Mrs. Shor who were passing through the Wakhan corridor with the intention of crossing into Chinese Turkestan, when about a mile from the Wakhjir Pass, saw a patrol of Chinese Turkestan soldiers on the pass. Their guides, who had previously warned them that there had been some inter-tribal fighting on the border, refused to go any further.(116) Fraser-Tytler, referring to the incident believed that the Chinese were in effective control of the Taghdumbash Pamir. The "Afghan frontier now runs west from pillar XII, following the northern ridge of the Sarikol range bordering on the Taghdumbash Pamir, and curves southwards over the Wakhjir Pass to join the Durand Line."(117)

On November 22, 1963, the Chinese government signed a border agreement with Afghanistan, regulating the 43-mile Sino-Afghan border at the extreme east of Wakhan. Thus to all intents and purposes the Wakhan salient was finally demarcated, a task that required ninety years. But that was not the end of the problem. On June 16, 1981 an agreement was signed between the Soviet Union and Afghanistan relating to the Wakhan salient. Although the Kabul radio broadcast of June 17, 1981 which carried the news did not give any details, but it said the two countries had demarcated the border "from the western shore of Lake Zorkul (Sir-i-Kul) [about half way along the northern edge of the Wakhan salient] up to Pik Povalo-Shveykovskogo" (the point at which the Afghan, Soviet and Chinese borders met on the northeast corner of the Wakhan salient).(118)

This fresh tampering with the salient brought a strong protest from the Chinese ministry of foreign affairs, which in a statement on July 22, 1981 said the Soviet Union had no right to conclude with a third country (i.e. Afghanistan) a border treaty involving this line, "since the land immediately to the north of the border was not the rightful territory of the Soviet Union, but had in fact for some 90 years been in dispute between China and Russia."(119) The Chinese statement while describing the treaty as "illegal and invalid", stressed that China had no outstanding territorial disputes with Afghanistan, having already regulated its border with that country along the Wakhan salient.(120)

The Chinese dispute with Russia goes back to the days of Tzarist expansion in the Pamirs in the 1880's. Although there had been an exchange of correspondence between Beijing and St. Petersburg in April 1894 regarding the Pamir region — Devendra Kaushik says it was agreed to preserve the existing order in the Pamirs region and respect their mutual position there(121) — China never acquiesced to the position obtaining in the region in 1895. In later years China claimed a "250-mile deep slice of Tajikistan west of Sarikol Range."(122) This would mean almost the whole of the Pamirs north of Wakhan. A New China News

Agency report of August 31, 1981 said that although in 1894 China and Russia had signed an agreement delineating the border, which specified that from the Uz-Bel mountain pass "the Russian boundary turns to the south-west and the Chinese boundary runs due south", Russia had "illegally" occupied some 20,000 square kilometres using armed force.(123) The 1894 exchange of letters between the two sides, the Chinese said, was not an agreement but merely that they had agreed to differ over the sovereignty of the territory in question and had decided to maintain the position which they held, pending a permanent settlement.(124)

Tass in its broadcast of August 11, 1981 had accused the Chinese of "inventing" by "falsifying history", a dispute over a matter which had been settled in the 1894 exchange of notes.(125) As far as the new Soviet-Afghan agreement on the Wakhan border was concerned, Tass said it was a bilateral affair involving no third country.(162)

The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in December 1979 has once again opened the uneasy settlement in the Pamirs for a renewed round of claims and counter-claims and demands for border adjustments. In the last round during the 1890's there were two main contestants — the British and Russians. This time, the Chinese have taken issue and asserted their claim to large chunks of Pamir territory, arguing that they had never accepted the earlier Pamir agreements. This fresh assertion of Chinese position in the Pamirs is in response to the Russian occupation of Wakhan in mid-1981. Chinese reports said that in June and July 1981 Soviet troops had started a massive occupation of the salient, meeting little or no resistance from the elements opposed to the Karmal government. By August the Russians had expelled the 2,000-3,000 Afghan residents (most of whom had left for Pakistan) and had closed the border with Pakistan. An August 24, 1981 report of the New China News Agency claimed that the Russians had installed ballistic missiles in the salient and also occupied Ishkashim, the pass controlling access to Wakhan from the rest of Afghanistan.(127)

China's umbrage is understandable, as the Wakhan link with Sinkiang not only made China and Afghanistan neighbours — an important diplomatic point —, but that the corridor provided an easy passage between the two countries through the Wakhjir Pass. The Soviet occupation effectively closed China's only door to Afghanistan, denying to Beijing the opportunity of claiming that it was directly assisting the anti-government elements in the country.

NEW CONFIGURATIONS

The Chinese allegations that the Soviet Union has "annexed" the corridor are not without substance. Beijing has since long been monitoring the cartographical changes in the Pamirs essentially because it has considered much of the area as a disputed territory with Russia. China never accepted the Anglo-Russian agreement of 1895 and summarily rejected the work of the joint Pamir commission. It was only in 1963 that China regulated the Sino-Afghan border, and that too formed a part of a larger Chinese effort to "correct" its borders with its neighbours — Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bhutan and Burma. The Chinese aim was to redemarcate the borders so as to finally eliminate the boundaries arbitrarily drawn by the British colonial power through "unequal treaties"

The Soviet Union has, likewise followed a policy of stabilising its borders, and in the case of Afghanistan, it signed as many as five agreements or notes ever since the Soviet state came into existence till 1981. Out of these, two pertained to the Afghan-Russian border in the Pamirs.

These accords were:

1. Treaty of friendship between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union signed at Moscow on February 28, 1921. Article 9 required the Soviet Union to hand over to Afghanistan frontier districts which belonged to that country in the 19th century.

2. Notes signed in Kabul on September 13, 1932 regarding the settlement of frontier disputes along the length of the Russo-Afghan frontier.

3. Frontier agreement between Afghanistan and Soviet Union signed at Moscow on June 13, 1946. Article 1 provided for the international boundary to follow the main channel of the Amu Darya and the Pyandzh to the head of navigation. Above this point, the median line, with the allocation of the islands in the rivers, was entrusted to a mixed commission. A protocol to the agreement held that article 9 of the 1921 treaty had expired.

4. Treaty concerning the Soviet-Afghan frontier signed at Moscow on January 18, 1958. This treaty noted that in accordance with the frontier agreement of June 13, 1946, demarcation and redemarcation documents (both dated September 29, 1948) were prepared. The treaty, however, held that "From Lake Zor-Kul to the junction of the frontiers of the U.S.S.R., Afghanistan and the Chinese People's Republic, the frontier shall be determined in accordance with the demarcation protocols of 1895." Protocol 2 of the treaty agreed upon the residence of frontier commissions.

5. Soviet-Afghan treaty on border demarcation, signed at Kabul on June 16, 1981. Radio Moscow said that the border running "from the western shore of Lake Zorkul to Pik Povala Sheveykovskogo" (also Peak Powalo-Schweikowski) had been demarcated. It added: "The treaty sets the legal seal on the existing guarded boundary and reaffirms its inviolability."

The signing of the first four treaties or notes would obviously suggest that the Russo-Afghan border had been totally regulated and whatever minor irritants existed, were removed. It appears that the treaty of June 13, 1946 took cognizance of some kind of a dispute regarding the boundary in the Pamirs, as both sides set up a mixed commission to look into the question. The treaty of January 18, 1958 apparently resolved this problem on the basis of demarcation and redemarcation documents prepared according to the agreement in the June 13, 1946 treaty. It was also noted in the 1958 treaty that the border from Lake Zor-Kul to the Sino-Russian-Afghan border trijunction, was to be determined in accordance with the demarcation protocols of 1895. The Soviet Union probably demurred from redemarcating the border along this stretch as it would have opened the whole issue of the Pamir

boundaries to scrutiny seeing that China had not accepted the 1895 border settlement. Besides, in 1958 the Soviet Union and People's Republic of China were close allies and Moscow must have been loath to enter into territorial polemics with Beijing and thus preferred to maintain the status quo. Chinese claimed territory in the Pamir is conterminous to that length of the Russo-Afghan border which the Soviet Union refused to negotiate with Afghanistan.

But, surprisingly even these four agreements did not resolve the border issues between Afghanistan and Russia, and it required the signing of yet another treaty on June 16, 1981. The area covered by this treaty, however, was the one omitted by the 1958 treaty, on the grounds that it was to be determined according to the demarcation protocols of 1895. The Soviet newspaper *Pravda*, commenting on the treaty said "it legally anchors the existing and guarded line of the Soviet-Afghan border at this point, and thus confirms at the same time the principle of imperturbability of the borders between the Soviet Union and the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan." *Pravda* added that what the agreement settled concerned solely the two states "and no one else".

This agreement was reached apparently after nearly a year's intense negotiations. On May 14, 1980 a high-powered Russian delegation visited Kabul, probably for border talks as it was received at the airport by the Afghan director general of survey and cartography. This was followed by a return visit to Moscow by a similar Afghan delegation on July 6, 1980. The same year in late October a Russian border team visited Kabul, followed by a visit of a high-powered Russian army delegation on November 13, 1980 for border negotiations. On June 16, 1981, the Afghan foreign minister, Shah Mohammad Dost and the Soviet ambassador Tabejew signed a treaty on the "state border between the western bank of the Zorkul Lake and Peak Powalo-Schweikowski". The *Pravda* comment that what the treaty settled concerned solely the two states "and no one else" probably was a reference to China's claims to the Soviet territory adjoining the area. Moscow-Beijing relations had been estranged for nearly two decades, enabling Russia to go ahead with its scheme to demarcate the border.

Nothing was revealed by either Russia or Afghanistan about the nature of the agreement except the cryptic comment by Radio Moscow that "The treaty sets the legal seal on the existing guarded boundary and reaffirms its inviolability." The phrase "reaffirms its inviolability" was possibly meant to give the impression that the Soviet and Afghan territories were divided by an "inviolable" border which was upheld by both sides. This was necessary as there were already reports in the international press, at a time when the negotiations on the border demarcation were underway, that the Russians were "occupying" the corridor.

Della Denman reported in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* on November 14, 1980 that "Several thousand Soviet troops from Tajikistan bordering on Wakhan, began pouring into the peninsula in May and June. The influx was ignored by the minority Ismaili community — the Wakhai — who have now apparently accepted the Soviet presence ... over 4,000 Soviets are stationed at major settlements and on the plateau along the panhandle ... Communications have been improved and mountain passes into China and Pakistan have been sealed off with mines and border patrols. The Soviet-Wakhan border has now been effectively moved south to become

a Soviet-Pakistan border ... But with the Wakhan salient already in Moscow's pocket, the Soviet army may make a more determined effort to tighten its grip on more of eastern Afghanistan." Similar reports were carried by BBC and the New China News Agency in early 1981.

The Economist, London wrote on August 9, 1980 that the "Soviet Union had effectively annexed Afghanistan's northwestern panhandle, sealing off Afghanistan's only direct border link with China and dropping the Soviet border down to rest on Pakistan's northernmost frontier." A *Reuter* report of November 15, 1980 said "... the Soviet military presence was apparently designed to seal off the passes into China and Pakistan through which aid and military supplies could be shipped through the corridor to anti-government insurgents in northern and central Afghanistan." The report also gave details of the deployment of Soviet forces in the corridor and improvement of roads. An Afghan defector, Lt. Gen. Ghulam Siddique Mirki, deputy chief of the Afghan secret service, KHAD, in an interview in April 1983 even claimed that the Russians had constructed some anti-aircraft missile sites in Wakhan and there was atleast one underground nuclear missile base which was targeted on China.

A surfeit of such reports in the foreign press seemed to suggest that the Soviet presence in Wakhan went beyond a mere collaboration with the Afghan army in policing the area against anti-government elements, and that the aim had international implications. The history of the making of the corridor shows the uneasiness of the Russians over the British inroads in the Pamirs as the British were worried about the Russian moves. Probably the Soviet Union had a relapse of the same fears and sought to control and strengthen the thin strip of Afghan realestate whose placement made Russian territory vulnerable to foreign pressure. Should the forces opposed to the Kabul regime succeed in controlling the salient with the help of sympathetic foreign powers, they would then be placed in a position to extend their "struggle" into the Soviet Union itself. Furthermore, as the Pamir area adjacent to Wakhan in the north is a disputed territory according to the Chinese, the embroilment of more than one power in the area appeared a probability. The Russians apparently acted to pre-empt such a possibility and in the process gained an important political advantage. By deploying their forces in the corridor they effectively threatened two troublesome neighbours.

The "occupation" of the salient by the Russians consequently involved no more than benefitting from the easier military logistics available to them due to the lateral proximity of the corridor with Tajikistan, rather than to maintain a facade of upholding Afghan sovereignty by re-routing their forces through Afghanistan to Wakhan from the west. The construction of bridges across the turbulent rivers and linking of the roads in Wakhan with the existing communication network in Tajikistan was merely a corollary to their initial intrusion into the area.

PAMIR DYNAMICS

Pakistan's concern over the Soviet presence in Wakhan along with the deployment of its forces whose strength might be almost equal to the local population of Wakhis, is therefore, understandable. It was

quite unexpected that an area which had been delineated by the common consent of two super powers in the nineteenth century and given the seal of sovereignty of a third power and had by tradition and usage become an accepted part of a formidable barrier which divided two geopolitical systems of Asia, could eightyfive years later turn into a cockpit of tension. Wakhan was after all something much more than a ridiculously shaped extension of Afghanistan. Its making took more than half a century and it represented the conclusion of one of the bloodiest chapters of colonial conquest in Asia. British romanticists called it the 'Great Game'.

The 'Great Game' was initiated by the British in the late 1830's when they marched into Afghanistan to bring it under their influence by installing a pretender to the amirship. Tzarist Russia replied by sending an army on an abortive mission to conquer Khiva a year later. The 1840's witnessed the start of a major advance by Britain across the territory which now forms most of Pakistan. The drive ended about twenty years later with the border of British India touching those of Iran, Afghanistan, China and a few small independent states in the shadow of the Hindu Kush and Karakorum ranges. After its initial set-back to conquer Khiva, Russia unleashed a massive steamroller advance against Central Asia in 1859 which came to a brief halt in 1876 after it had occupied almost the whole of the region except for a broad strip running along the north of Afghanistan and the Pamirs. The Russian territory thus extended from the Caspian Sea in the west to the Tien Shan range in the east. In the process Moscow had annexed or reduced to vassalage the three principal states — Kokand, Bukhara and Khiva — and a number of small principalities.

In India, further British colonial progress was halted by the freedom uprising of 1857 and there was little that London could do in frustrating the rapid Russian advance southwards. In any case, Britain was not inclined to counteract Moscow militarily in a theatre where the Russians were better placed in all departments of the war game. Thus by the 1870's, London becoming thoroughly alarmed at the speed of the Tzarist conquest, sought to stem the tide mainly through diplomatic means. Negotiations were started and in 1873 the Anglo-Russian agreement was signed which delimited Afghan border in the north from the Pamirs to Iran, with the Amu Darya being accepted as the boundary for much of the length. The agreement also, tacitly divided the spheres of influence between Britain and Russia. But, surprisingly the treaty did not prevent Russia from adding Khiva and Kokand to its empire within three years of its signing.

Much like the British colonial strategists had the "forward policy" to explain their conquests, the Russians had the Gorchakov doctrine which argued that the "civilised states" were trapped in a vicious cricle of permanent advance in search of stable frontiers. At the same time Britain followed up its "forward policy" by a scheme of creating buffer states between its Indian colony and major powers in the vicinity. The 1873 treaty partly aimed at this, but Russia and Britain disagreed on the nature of the buffer. While Britain favoured a broad swathe of territory unconquered by Russia and running the length of Afghanistan's northern boundary, Russia wanted Afghanistan to be made into a buffer. London disagreed with this idea as it claimed that Afghanistan fell under its sphere of influence. Russia accepted the British argument and Afghanistan was pushed under British hegemony.

In 1878-79, Britain suspecting Afghan neutrality moved to consolidate its influence over that country by sending its army across the international frontier. The upshot of the second Anglo-Afghan war was the treaty of Gandamak through which Britain acquired a few Afghan districts and a renewed assurance that Kabul would be loyal to Britain. No sooner did the British army return in triumph to India, than the Russians revived their relentless onslaught and within five years (1881-86) annexed the few remaining pieces of territory in Central Asia adjacent to Afghanistan's yet unmarked border. During this second phase of the Russian advance, Britain maintained a regular barrage of angry but futile protests to St. Petersburg, the resentment reaching the highest decibels of diplomatic protest when Russian forces annexed Panjdeh oasis, an area claimed by Afghanistan and at a time when a joint border commission was demarcating the border in that area. Although London was treaty bound to extend military assistance to Afghanistan if its territorial integrity was threatened, but in the case of Panjdeh, nothing happened beyond some raucous sabre-rattling. Moscow was fully benefitting from the inability or unwillingness of London to militarily confront it in Central Asia.

By the beginning of the 1890's, Afghanistan's border with Russian territory was demarcated in the west leaving a strip in the Pamirs. It was here that the 'Great Game' shifted and the third and final round was played out with intense rivalry. In the 1873 Anglo-Russian agreement, British officials advocating Kabul's interests had arbitrarily marked out the Afghan boundary in the Pamirs basing their claims on a hazy knowledge of the geography of the region and the Afghan ruler, Amir Sher Ali Khan's testimony of the historic territorial limits of the Afghan domain rather than on the actual position obtaining. The result was that the international boundary became controversial on three counts:

1. The Russians and British differed on the location of Amu river and its principal tributary which marked the boundary.

2. Afghanistan continued to claim the two trans-Oxus states of Shugnan and Roshan which Britain had handed over to Russia.

3. The boundary which was expected to meet the Chinese border somewhere in the frozen wastes of the Pamirs, petered out earlier while the tangible presence of Chinese authority was further east. This resulted in creating a wide gap in the Pamirs with no known claimant, and allowing an easy passage to Russia to the northern states.

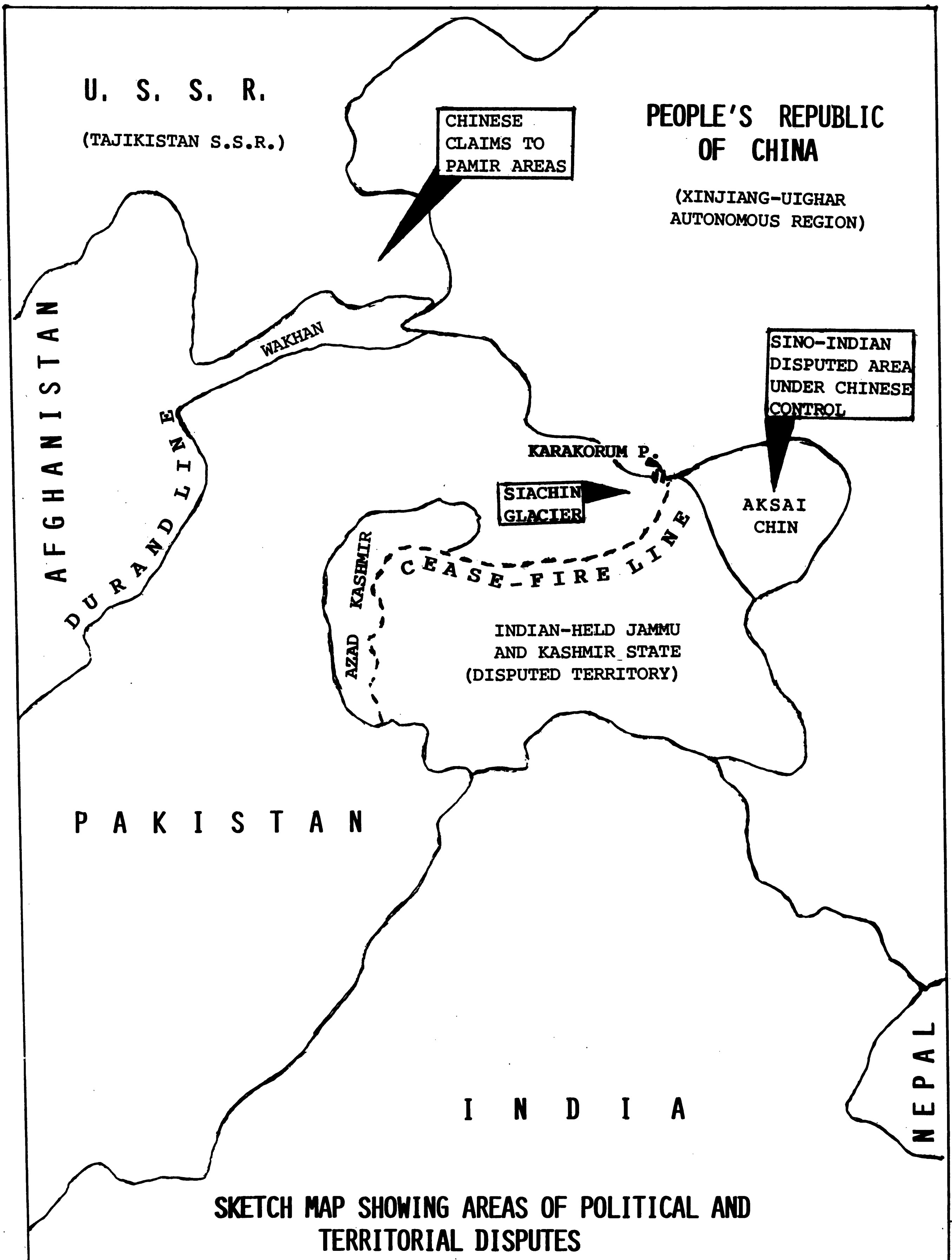
In the years following the signing of the 1873 treaty, Britain was not overly worried about the Pamirs as the Russian "peril" was still far west, and in Chinese Turkestan (present day Xinjiang province) a Kirghiz adventurer, Yaqub Beg (Ghazi Atalik) had overthrown Chinese authority and set up a viable state in Kashgar. The British were quick to see the vast strategic benefit available in converting Kashgar into a buffer in the east against China and Russia, and consequently befriended the state. The Russians were then slowly moving towards Kokand in the north. But, in the next decade, not only Kashgar ceased to exist with China reimposing its suzerainty, but that the Russians in a bold move had swept through Kokand southwards and established themselves in northern Pamirs. It was a few years later that British

officials discovered to their dismay the famous "Pamir gap" which opened a broad unclaimed frontage on the Hindu Kush. The Russians were then positioned in the north, the Chinese in the east and an ill-defined border of Afghanistan ended half way in the Pamirs. The danger was compounded by another discovery that the Pamirs and the Hindu Kush were not much of a barrier as was believed and that a number of passes allowed easy passage into Hunza and Chitral in the south. Both these discoveries demolished British plans to secure India in the north by fabricating a geopolitical hedge of sorts.

Afghan occupation of the trans-Oxus states of Shugnan and Roshan in 1883 in spite of strong Russian protests provided Britain with a partial solution to the Pamir gap. Although Britain had earlier accepted Russian claims to these states under the 1873 treaty, it now reversed its view, partly aided by the "discovery" of British explorers that the "true" principal tributary of the Amu river flowed north of these states. Britain's subsequent efforts were aimed at determining the eastward extent of Shugnan's (which meant Afghanistan's) territory in the Pamirs, and an explorer on such a mission found traces of Afghan suzerainty upto Alichur Pamirs. This still left a gap reaching to the Chinese border.

British fears were aggravated by the ease with which Russian cossacks cantered across the Pamirs reaching down to Chitral and Hunza. In fact, a Russian military delegation paid a surprise visit to Hunza amidst considerable pomp and publicity at a time when British officials were refused permission to cross the state. This resulted in not only the occupation of the state and imposition of British control, but also in directly extending British presence in the Pamirs and leading to swift retaliatory moves by the Russians. Two British officials who were reconnoitering the Pamirs were arrested and expelled by a Russian officer on the grounds that they were trespassing in the Pamirs which were Russian territory. This incident caused much umbrage in London and although there were threats of war, but the situation was contained, basically because Britain was in no position to militarily confront Russia in the Pamirs. Moreover, St. Petersburg, in order to mollify London, regretted the incident.

British officials trying to close the gap, encouraged the Chinese to stake a claim to the Pamirs, which they did by sending a force to Somatash, only to have it mauled by an Afghan garrison which had earlier been placed there on the advice of a British official. The Chinese withdrew from the Pamirs and refused to have anything more to do with British efforts to keep the Russians out. Meanwhile, the Russians reviving their earlier claim, reappeared in the Pamirs in force, and finding the Afghan garrison at Somatash wiped it out almost to the last man. They, then moved south, expelled a Chinese military post and set up a garrison in the Pamirs. The Afghans who had placed their forces in the Pamirs on British advice, were bitter about the clash and withdrew from most of the Pamirs, including the eastern portion of the Wakhan, leaving the Russians in complete control of the strategic region. The gap, the British were trying to stuff with extensions of Afghan and Chinese territories, was now wider than before with the Russians enjoying logistical advantage. The nearest substantial British force was in Rawalpindi, a very long march away across impassable terrain.



SKETCH MAP SHOWING AREAS OF POLITICAL AND TERRITORIAL DISPUTES

Having failed to utilise the topography of the area and the presence of two neighbouring Pamir powers to secure the region, Britain finally turned to diplomacy, and initiated talks with Russia for resolving the issue. After protracted negotiations an agreement was reached which gave most of the Pamirs to Russia, recognising a thin strip along the north face of Hindu Kush as Afghan territory. Britain induced the Afghan ruler, Amir Abdur Rahman to accept the arrangement with offers of liberal financial assistance. Afghanistan withdrew its claims to Shugnan and Roshan, while Bukhara, a Russian vassal state, evacuated Darwaz, a small area in the loop of the Oxus north of Badakhshan. Thus the Wakhan salient took shape. A joint Pamir boundary commission in 1895 demarcated the border upto a point in Sarikol range where the Chinese territory was believed to extend. Afghanistan had nothing to do with the talks or demarcation work as Britain was representing it, while the Chinese refused to recognise the treaty or the boundary. They maintained their claim that large pieces of the Pamirs belonged to China.

In 1947 when Britain withdrew from the subcontinent, Pakistan inherited the border with Afghanistan, the instruments covering the border and many of the policies except the use of Afghanistan as a buffer. Pakistan was not a great power nor was it involved in a confonrtation with the Soviet Union. Thus Wakhan ceased to serve the primary purpose it was devised for and to Islamabad it was merely another part of Afghanistan. That was all there was to it. Pakistan did not have any big power pretensions nor was it inclined to unneccessarily seek a hallucinatory role as an international leader, like India, for it to require a bridge with the Soviet Union.

However, Wakhan served an unintended purpose, which was unlike its initial function as a cushion to prevent friction between the colonial territories of super powers. The salient immured Pakistan from becoming a border-sharing neighbour of the Soviet Union with all its political strains and stresses. Consequently the utility of the hedge was continued in a mutated form and Pakistan did not have to burden itself with the task of policing its northern ramparts at a cost which it could not afford. Islamabad's security perceptions, therefore, devolved to some extent on having a neutral Afghanistan as a neighbour.

It was in December 1979 that Pakistan's security perception in the region changed in the face of massive Soviet intrusion in Afghanistan and the subsequent deployment of Russian forces in the salient in considerable strength. While the Soviet presence at Torkham and Chaman was a matter of serious concern, but the threat faced from Wakhan was of a different nature largely due to its permanence and strategic emplacement in a highly sensitive region. The dynamics of Pamir politics were once again brought to the fore creating a potential for a political confrontation by the traditional powers or their replacements. But in the 1980's, unlike a century ago, there was a new permutation in the pattern of allies. Pakistan had replaced Britain as the *de facto* and *de jure* power to the south of the Pamirs. Afghanistan was allied with Russia and there was a political symbiosis between China and Pakistan. A fifth claimant to a place in the Pamir drama was India, largely given that role through its leaders' unilateral declaration of India having an interest in the destiny of a region over which it did not exercise any sovereignty imaginary or otherwise. But India gave practical shape to its claim by aligning itself with the USSR-Afghan axis. Moreover, in the last couple of years India has tended

to follow a policy of extending its control in the northern portion of the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir by inching up the Siachin glacier in the general direction of the Pamirs.

Much of this confrontation today is speculative and diplomatic, with Pakistan and China having voiced strong disquiet over the Soviet presence in the corridor. The rapid build up of Russian military strength in Wakhan and the reported introduction of sophisticated ballistic missiles has seriously disturbed the balance of power in the region. The sudden escalation in India's shrill articulation of its "claims" to almost the whole of Pakistan's Northern Areas, which is adjacent to the corridor, has only heightened the tension.

While it cannot be said that this is the beginning of a major confrontation in the Pamirs, but the ingredients do exist for creating a situation which will not be salubrious to peace in South Asia. The proximity of so many contending nations in so small an area which is surrounded by a surfeit of antagonistic developments does not bode well for the future. Besides, there is the major ponderable of Soviet presence in the Wakhan that has to be taken into consideration. The secret treaty signed between the Soviet Union and Afghanistan in 1981 and the groundwork that has since been undertaken to effect an inter-joining of the communicational and defence systems of Wakhan and Tajikistan, do suggest that Soviet control over the corridor will continue even after a possible future withdrawal from Afghanistan. Such facts only vindicate the Chinese assertion of Wakhan being "annexed" by the Russians. While Afghan sovereignty over the area will be upheld by the evidence of maps, but the actual position obtaining would make Russian presence a permanent reality.

While such an eventuality is largely syllogistic, based on historic and contemporary political factors, its possibility appears real. The Hindu Kush range, long seen as an impregnable barrier (but in recent times reduced to a mere cartographical feature due to the advance in military technology) was still accepted as a line which divided two political systems. That line has now been traversed and Wakhan has become a wedge which can disturb the existing alignments. The century of peace that was possible because a tangible balance of interests had been reached and none of the Pamir powers had done anything to distrub it, has now been replaced by tension. This does not suggest that war or even the possibility of hostilities is imminent, but it does mean that a strategic area has unnecessarily been exposed to the unfortunate fallout of international rivalry.

Looking into the future, whatever may be the solution of the Afghan question, Wakhan will continue to remain a potential flashpoint. The Pamir tension of nearly a century past has been resuscitated with some qualitative changes in the scenario. The Russian presence in the northern glacis of the subcontinent has become a permanent part of the landscape, casting an ominous shadow not only across Pakistan, but other countries of South Asia. It is difficult to imagine how a super power can easily relinquish a strategic advantage it has gained in its rimland, or expose its own territory to the danger that has been created by the growth of antagonistic forces.

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